

Coping with the Christmas Season

By Dr Bill Webster

According to the old song "It's the most wonderful time of the year". But this year might not seem quite so wonderful for you. Oh, it's more than the usual "bah humbug!" stuff. This year Christmas may be different for you, yet the world doesn't seem to notice or care. A myriad of Christmas images still flood your senses: chestnuts roasting on an open fire; sleigh bells in the snow; stockings on the mantle awaiting Santa's visit. "'Tis the season to be jolly", they say, but you may feel anything **BUT** jolly.

In fact, this year the Christmas bells may have a different ring for you. Circumstances have meant a significant change in your life. Perhaps someone you care about has died. There may be an empty chair at the Christmas table this year. But it will not compare to the empty feeling in your heart. Things like pulling out the old familiar decorations and tree ornaments will be a painful reminder of what you have lost.

Perhaps you're anticipating these holidays with some apprehension because of a significant loss. Probably nothing will make these holidays perfect, but perhaps there are a few suggestions to make them more bearable.

- **Reduce the Pressure:** There is always a lot of pressure around Christmas with a thousand and one things like shopping, baking, cards etc. This year you may not feel like you have the energy to do very much, and frankly, you just aren't excited about it. So ask yourself: "How much **CAN** I do?" and "What do I **WANT** to do" Figure out what you **SHOULD** do, compare it with what you **CAN** do, divide it by what you **WANT** to do, and stick to it.

- **Redefine your Expectations:** Realise that **YOU** are responsible for your own happiness. So **ACT** rather than **REACT**. Don't wait for others to decide what to do, and hope they'll include you. Decide what would be a meaningful way to spend this difficult holiday. Do the things that are important and special to you. Do your best in the difficult circumstances and, above all, go easy on yourself. If something doesn't work out this year, you can change it and try again next year. Feel free to do whatever is right for you.
- **Relive your Memories:** Christmas is always a time of many memories. This one may be especially nostalgic. I think it is important to relive those memories. It is amazing how often we try to avoid the subject of loss. You may find that no-one seems to want to mention the fact that someone has died or that there has been a loss or a change. After all, they surmise, "someone might get upset or emotional". Yet the situation is on everyone's mind, but hey, we **ARE** upset whether we acknowledge it or not. Denying the reality of the situation is often harder than facing up to it.
- If someone has died, can we find a way to **celebrate the person's life** as well as **acknowledging their death**? Perhaps you could light a memorial candle at the dinner table, or take some time to share special memories or stories. Humorous incidents recalled can have a special healing quality to them. Try not to ignore the fact that someone is missing this year, for to pretend that nothing has happened is so unnatural, it actually increases the tension.

Remember the old song that lamented "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth"? If I were to ask you all **you** want for Christmas this year, I think I know what it would be. All I wanted for Christmas 1983 was my wife back, for life to be back to normal, or for things to be the way they were the last Christmas before she died. I really do understand those feelings. And yet, even though this Christmas may not be so jolly, can you **be thankful for SOMETHING**? Of course you are sad because someone you care about is absent, or your situation has changed, and that is natural and it is right. But can you be thankful for the years you did have and the memories you still share?

Celebrate what you **HAVE** as well as realising what you're missing. Someone may be missing, but are there people who **WILL** be there this year for whom you can be thankful? Don't allow looking back at the **past** to spoil what you have in the **present**. Yes, you miss the person who will not be there, but are there children, relatives and friends you can enjoy today? It may not cancel out your sadness but it certainly makes it easier.

And what of the future? You may wonder if you will ever feel happy again, or if life will ever be the same. Those feelings are understandable, and probably little I say will convince you **today** that you are going to be OK and that you will find a way through this. But it is important that you hold on to that hope. You may not be able to see it, and you may not even be sure you can believe it, but you must hold on to hope that there will be days that are brighter.

When a famous Scottish artist was asked to paint a picture representing "Hope", he labored diligently on the masterpiece. But when the drawing was finally unveiled, those who had come to see the work were astounded. For he had depicted hope as a woman in tattered clothes, a battered and bowed figure, playing a harp. The harp had only one string left intact, and yet the woman was plucking on that one string with unbounded determination and zeal. **But that IS hope.** When buffeted by the trials and tribulations of life, hope plays on the only strings left to it.

So, here we are at this festive season, and perhaps you may feel like your life has been battered and broken by cruel circumstances. Don't spend all your time looking at the broken strings. What are the ones that are still intact? You may have had a devastating loss, and nothing and no-one should minimize the importance or the difficulty of that. But you haven't lost everything. There may be others around who are important to you. And you have yourself. Even though you may feel that you have lost a lot, you can find ways to make the most of what you have left.

Dr Bill Webster has a booklet entitled "A Not So Jolly Christmas" including numerous "Helpful Hints on Handling the Holidays". His web site at www.griefjourney.com will launch a completely new look very soon, with enhanced visuals, easier navigation and superior functionality. We invite you to take advantage of the grief support resources on the website.