

The Compassionate Friends NSW Inc

is an organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grand-parents offering friendship, understanding and support to one another.

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COPING WITH SPECIAL OCCASIONS



There are many days in the year that are special occasions for families. The main ones are the birthday of your child, brother or sister, or grandchild, the anniversary of his or her death, and Christmas. Others include new year, birthdays and anniversaries of others in the family, and events such as wedding and christenings, starting school, moving on to secondary school, bar mitzvah, confirmation, cultural events, and holidays can all be painful. The pain of grief invariably intensifies on these occasions, and the first birthday, Christmas, new year and anniversary of the death can be especially difficult.

The birthday carries poignant memories of previous years, the noticeable absence of preparation for a celebration and the thought, which will remain throughout the coming years, "our child would have been ... years old today".

At Christmas the whole world seems consumed with tinsel and glitter, and everyone else seems to be celebrating with complete families (although in reality this is not so). The terrible void in the hearts and lives of bereaved parents is accentuated.

The first anniversary of the death is often the time when the events of that day, a year before, are fully relived and realised in our memories and can be accompanied by feelings of anger, resentment, helplessness and utter misery.

Anticipating the event can often be worse than the actual day or days. Remember that the worst that can happen – the death of your child, brother or sister, or grandchild – has already happened. Nothing can be worse than that.

Grieving families have limitations, so need to think about what they want to do on that day. Each individual needs to be encouraged to express their grief in their own way. Many bereaved families have found it helpful to alter their usual activities, especially at the first Christmas. Be kind to yourselves and don't necessarily be influenced by what other people advise. Involve your other children in your decisions as far as possible, and then let relatives and friends know your plans.

Special occasions can be emotionally, physically and mentally draining. You will need every bit of strength, so try to get enough rest and avoid taking on too many responsibilities. Household chores can be limited and delegated. Making lists can be helpful.

If Christmas shopping is too difficult, ask others to help you. You may also consider using a mail-order catalogue, and perhaps reducing the number of cards you sent. For the first Christmas after your child has died, you may wish to include the additional card about your child and the circumstances of his or her death.

You could try rehearsing the day or event in your mind, and think of ways of avoiding especially difficult stumbling-blocks. Ask other for help in coping with these.

Some ideas which families have found helpful over the years are:

- ❁ lighting a special candle
- ❁ planting a tree
- ❁ buying a special plant or flowers for their home
- ❁ taking flowers to the cemetery or crematorium
- ❁ giving a gift in memory of their child
- ❁ making a donation to charity

At Christmas time:

- ❁ Let your children and others help with decorating the tree and the house (if you decide to do that)
- ❁ As an alternative to a tree consider a centerpiece made from foliage or flowers, or a ceramic or artificial tree
- ❁ You could try opening presents and having Christmas dinner at a different time from previous years; also attending a different service or church
- ❁ Comfort may come from doing something for others, for instance invite a guest (senior citizen, foreign student) for the day.

Be encouraged that every member of The Compassionate Friends has been through the experiences of special occasions, and will help you if they can.