

CHRISTMAS MOURNING

*The holidays often bring great joy.
But for those suffering through
grief, the season may
magnify their loss.*

BY SUSAN RYDER

Cooler, shorter days and falling leaves usher in the trifecta of holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s. Anticipation of friends, family, food and fun takes center stage. It’s not, however, the “Most Wonderful Time of the Year” for some folks.

Five years ago in November, then-fourth grader Cara Ford lost her father. Six weeks later, on New Year’s Day, Cara and her mother Theresa lost Kyle—15-year-old brother and son. To say that the holiday season is painful for them would be an understatement.

Theresa Ford said that, when November rolls around, they think, “Oh, it’s November; we wish it was February.”

We are “sold a picture of perfection, of what could be and should be,” said John Kajic, manager of the Highmark Caring Place, a Center for Grieving Children, in Lemoyne. These expectations, he said, “reinforce a profound sense of grief.”

Indeed, the holidays can make mourning even more difficult, said Susan Resavy, director of family services at the Hospice of Central Pennsylvania, located in Susquehanna Township.

The holidays are filled with ritual, tradition and expectation. So, when a person who is a part of the tradition dies, the loss is magnified, she said.

What that heightened grief looks like “depends on how that person has coped all along,” said Resavy. If they have been quiet, they could be more quiet; if intensely sad, they could be more tearful; and if anxiety-filled, even more anxious.

EMPTY SEAT

For Joy Gardner of Carlisle, husband Bob should have been with her this Thanksgiving, but she lost her beloved to cancer on Sept. 18, 2013.

“He was born on a Wednesday and died on a Wednesday,” she said, still reeling from the loss. Seeing the empty seat at the table proved to be too much. The family chose to eat out for Thanksgiving this year.

Gardner suggests it’s a good idea to “change it up” to better cope over the holidays.

Part of that change involves having a plan. Resavy said that families should ask the question, “How do you want to deal with the holiday?”

Kajic echoes Resavy’s sentiment, saying that families need to have a discussion. While families talk, they also need to keep in mind that there is no rulebook—no right or wrong way to grieve.

Angela Mesceda of Linglestown had a strategy for the holidays. She lost her husband James in March 2012, so decided to make a plan to better cope. That, however, didn’t go as well as she hoped.

“My plan went to hell in a hand basket because I cried all day,” she said.

Nonetheless, she advises making a specific list of

what you want to do. “Once you do it, you feel the accomplishment,” she said.

Part of that plan may include choosing not to participate in some traditions. Individuals and families may decide not to have a tree, light the menorah or have a Thanksgiving turkey.

The Ford family discusses every year how they will celebrate. The first Christmas after Kyle died, they decided to forgo a tree, then, gradually, over the next five years, began decorating again.

Because tree decorating was a family affair, they don’t dig into the old Christmas ornaments. Instead, they have a new theme each year and remember Kyle by buying an ornament for him.

While this works for them, Theresa Ford wouldn’t insist that people handle their grief exactly the same way. “Grief is so different for everybody,” she said. “Do what you feel is right at the moment.”

Gardner acknowledged that her family showed a great deal of variety in how they grieved. Family members spent a lot of time crying last year, but noted that, “sometimes we weren’t crying all together.” Also, since her husband died just a few months before the holidays, she didn’t change the ritual much the first year.

Often, families are in such shock that the first holidays go by in a blur, so “don’t be alarmed if year two is harder than year one,” said Resavy.

REAL MEANING

Traditions can still hold a place in grieving. The stability and familiarity of an old tradition may be great comfort to a grieving family. In addition, new traditions can be created that include the deceased in the holiday. This can happen through making a toast at dinner, buying an ornament for the tree or preparing a favorite meal.

“If you find comfort in traditions, hold on to them,” said Kajic.

Finding ways to include the deceased family member also provides segue for discussion. People often don’t know how to bring up the deceased person and aren’t sure if they should say their name for fear of upsetting others.

“It gives people an opportunity to reminisce,” said Resavy.

She recounted a story of how the grandchildren of a deceased hospice client took it upon themselves to put pictures they created of their grandpa on “his” chair at Thanksgiving. That then became the family’s new Thanksgiving ritual.

Luckily, these families didn’t have to traverse the road of grief alone. Both Hospice of Central Pennsylvania and Highmark Caring Place helped. “Hospice people are wonderful people—angels,” said Mesceda.

“It was like we were all a big family,” said Cara Ford, who twice participated in Highmark Caring Place’s program.

Although much help is available, families still may acutely feel grief, but often there is hope mixed in. Theresa Ford said that her family discusses how to handle the holidays.

“But, mostly importantly, we try to focus on what Christmas really means and how truly blessed we are in so many ways,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong—there is still a lot of crying that goes on in our house. I don’t think this will ever go away.” **B**

Seeking Help

Resources are available if you or someone you know needs help getting through the holiday due to the death of a loved one.

Highmark Caring Place offers grief services for families with children. Its website, www.highmarkcaringplace.com, contains information specific to coping with the holidays.

Hospice of Central Pennsylvania also offers grief services, which are available to everyone, not just those served by the hospice. Information can be found at www.hospiceofcentralpa.org.

Both organizations provide services free of charge.

