FREE GUIDE

Grief and the Holidays Toolkit

Decide what to keep, what to skip, and how to ask for help.

Ask Dr. Penny
Comfort, care, hope · askdrpenny.com

WELCOME

When the season feels different

Holidays are built around togetherness, tradition and memory. When someone is missing, those same things can make the season one of the hardest times of the year.

This toolkit will help you plan ahead, so the holidays happen a little more on your terms. You will find ideas, short scripts, and worksheets to fill in. Use what helps and leave the rest.

- It is fine to celebrate, and it is fine not to.
- It is fine to change traditions this year, and change them back next year.
- It is fine for the anticipation to be harder than the day itself. For many people, it is.

A gentle place to start

Read the next two pages, then fill in the "Keep, change, or skip" worksheet. Everything else can come later.

UNDERSTANDING

Why the holidays can hurt more

You are not imagining it. There are real reasons the holiday season can stir up grief, even years after a loss.

- **Traditions highlight the gap.** The empty chair, the recipe no one else makes, the gift you would have bought.
- **Everyone else seems happy.** Music, ads and social media show joy everywhere, which can make grief feel lonely.
- **Expectations pile up.** Hosting, travel, gifts and family dynamics all take energy you may not have.
- **Memories come flooding back.** Smells, songs and places carry years of shared moments.
- **Shorter days.** Less daylight affects mood and energy for many people.

> *Missing someone at the holidays is a sign of how much they belonged in them.*

PLANNING

Keep, change, or skip

You do not have to do every tradition the way you always have. Looking at each one on purpose, before the season gets busy, gives you choices instead of obligations.

1. **List your usual traditions.** Decorating, the big meal, services, gift-giving, visits, cards, special outings.
2. **Ask of each one:** "Will this bring comfort, or just pain this year?"
3. **Sort them.** Keep the ones that comfort you. Change the ones that matter but feel too hard as they are. Skip the ones you simply cannot face this year.
4. **Share your plan.** Tell the people affected, kindly and early.

Examples of a change

Host at a friend’s home instead of yours. Go out for the meal. Do a smaller tree. Volunteer together instead of exchanging gifts.

WORKSHEET

My keep, change, or skip list

Write each tradition in a row, then note your choice and any change you want to try.

Tradition	Keep, change, or skip?	If changing, how?

REMEMBERING

Ways to honor the person you miss

Many people find it helps to include their loved one in the season on purpose, rather than trying not to think about them.

- Light a candle at the meal and say their name.
- Make their favorite dish, or ask someone else to make it.
- Hang an ornament, photo or keepsake in their honor.
- Ask everyone to share a favorite memory or story.
- Give to a cause they cared about, or buy a gift for someone in need in their name.
- Visit a place that was special to them.
- Write them a letter and read it aloud, or keep it private.

Try this

Choose one idea from this list and decide when you will do it. Putting it on the calendar makes it easier to follow through.

GATHERINGS

Planning your energy, and your exit

Parties and family gatherings can be both comforting and exhausting. A little planning helps you take part without being overwhelmed.

- **Decide in advance how long you will stay.** An hour is fine. Arriving late or leaving early is fine.
- **Drive yourself,** or arrange a ride, so you can leave when you need to.
- **Bring a support person.** Agree on a signal that means "I need a break" or "I am ready to go".
- **Find a quiet spot.** A short walk outside or a few minutes alone can reset you.
- **Limit alcohol.** It can make emotions harder to manage, and the next day heavier.

> *You are allowed to protect your heart, even at a party.*

SCRIPTS

Saying no, and saying yes

You will probably get invitations, questions and well-meant advice this season. Having a few words ready makes it easier to answer honestly.

Saying no kindly

- "Thank you for including me. This year I am keeping things very quiet."
- "I would love to come for dessert, but I will skip the full dinner."
- "I am not up for hosting this year. Could someone else take it on?"

Asking for what you need

- "Please feel free to talk about him. It helps me to hear his name."
- "Could you check on me on the day itself? Mornings are hardest."
- "Would you come with me to the service? I don’t want to go alone."

FAMILIES

Helping children through the holidays

Children often look forward to the holidays even while they are grieving. Mixed feelings are normal for them too: excitement one minute, sadness the next.

- Keep some familiar routines, so the season still feels safe and predictable.
- Talk about the person who died, and invite children to share memories.
- Let children help choose a way to remember them, like a special ornament or a card.
- Tell them what will be different this year before it happens.
- Allow joy. Laughing and opening presents is not forgetting.
- Look after yourself too. Children notice and borrow your steadiness.

Try this

Ask, "What part of the holidays do you most want to keep this year?" You may be surprised by their answer.

SELF-CARE

Looking after yourself through the season

The weeks before and after a holiday can take as much out of you as the day itself. Building in small moments of care helps you get through without running on empty.

- **Lower the bar.** Fewer cards, simpler meals, shop online. Good enough is a gift to yourself this year.
- **Protect your rest.** Say no to one thing each week so you have an evening to recover.
- **Get daylight.** A morning walk or time by a window helps with mood when days are short.
- **Keep one ordinary routine.** Your usual coffee, workout, or bedtime can feel steadying when everything else is different.
- **Let your faith or practice hold you.** Services, prayer, or quiet reflection may feel tender this year. Go gently, and go if it helps.
- **Book support ahead of time.** A counseling session in December or January gives you a place to set things down.

Try this

Write down three small comforts you can reach for on a hard evening: a person, a place, and an activity.

WORKSHEET

My plan for the day itself

The holiday itself can feel long. Planning its shape ahead of time gives you something to lean on.

How I want to start the morning:

Who I will be with, and for how long:

How I will remember the person I miss:

What I will do if it gets too hard (and who I will call):

Something comforting I will do in the evening:

AFTERWARDS

After the holidays

When the decorations come down and life returns to normal, some people feel relief. Others feel a new kind of emptiness. Both are common.

- **Plan something small for the week after.** A walk with a friend, a quiet day off, a favorite meal.
- **Notice what helped.** Write down what you would do again next year, and what you would change.
- **Be gentle with the new year.** Resolutions can wait. Rest and recovery count as goals.
- **Check in with yourself.** If the heaviness is not lifting after a few weeks, it may be time to talk with someone.

> *You made it through a season you were not sure you could face. That matters.*

YOUR SPACE

Notes

What helped this year, what to change next year, and anything else you want to remember.

WHEN YOU NEED MORE

You do not have to do this alone.

Grief around the holidays is common, and it does not mean you are going backwards. Our grief support sessions offer a calm place to plan for the season and talk about what it brings up. Consider reaching out if:

- Day-to-day life has felt hard to manage for more than a few weeks.
- Sleep, appetite, work or school have changed in ways that worry you.
- You feel numb, hopeless, or cut off from the people around you.
- Someone close to you has said they are worried about you.

If you are in crisis, reach out now

Call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (US), or call 911 if you or someone else is in immediate danger. Outside the US, contact your local emergency number.

About Ask Dr. Penny

Ask Dr. Penny Counseling offers individual, grief, family, and faith-based counseling, in person and by video. Sessions move at your pace, and most first appointments happen within a week.

Book a session at askdrpenny.com

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