

Desert Hot Springs man, Ever After Celebration offer tips on mixing mourning with Christmas celebrations

Kate McGinty • The Desert Sun • December 24, 2010

Because his 15-year-old stepson died only 11 days before Christmas last year, John Card feels like this holiday season is his first Christmas in mourning.

"I had to deal with just a flood of emotions. It actually was overwhelming," the Desert Hot Springs man said. "It can lead you down a path of a pretty heavy depression."

Card had to force himself to prepare to celebrate the holidays while also struggling with the one-year anniversary of his stepson's death. Michael Roseware died Dec. 14, 2009, after suffering from an intestinal disease.

"I had to look to the children I still have to raise, and I realized that I have to keep myself up for them and then get into the Christmas spirit, which was very difficult," Card said.

"But I did it, and little by little that load on my heart is lifted."

Behind the cheerful family dinners of Christmas and other holidays, confusion and sadness often linger for people who are still mourning the loss of a friend or relative.

Many find themselves feeling guilty about celebrating the holiday at all, said Patrice Goldberg. She founded **Ever After Celebrations, an Orange county-based company that coordinates memorial tributes.**

"This year in the holidays, it might not be called a celebration, it's more of a tribute," she said. "But it's still important that family gather, so it's giving them permission and then helping them understand that it doesn't matter what other people do. It's what's right for this family."

Goldberg encourages clients to tackle their fears about celebrating Christmas by talking with their friends and family about their fond memories of their loved one, as well as what they need while they

grieve.

That open communication is key, she said.

Goldberg referred to a recent client whose husband, also a father and grandfather, had died. The widow wondered whether to leave open a seat at the Christmas dinner table this year in her husband's honor.

Goldberg suggested the woman call her children before the holiday and ask them directly how best to handle it.

"There are the Dear Abby's for social events — but when it comes to talking in a family gathering, there is not a lot of etiquette," she said.

"During a death, people are afraid of doing the wrong thing or saying the wrong thing. The bottom line answer is there is no right or wrong. Every family is different."

Card credits the same tools — accepting support from family and friends as well as discussing the sweet and even silly memories of his stepson — for providing him strength through the holidays.

"Christmas has to go on for the children, and it's important that I celebrate it," Card said. "It's important I teach them the true meaning of Christmas and let them know to be happy."

What to say, not say

Reach out and acknowledge the loss, rather than ignoring it.

Say something memorable about the person or ask a question about his life. That appears more honest than only a message about how hard the loss must be.

Do not bring up your own stories of loss and mourning unless you're asked.

If you want to help, consider not only the emotional loss, but also the practical chores. Offer up services like accounting, babysitting, car maintenance, computer help or driving.

Design a "gift certificate" that promises patience, support, time and your loving presence.

Record the memories to soften the fear they will be forgotten. Photo collages or well-loved music work well.

Source: Ever After Celebrations

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