

6 Steps To Survive The Holiday Season After Loss

by [Donna Mebane](#) • December 1, 2015

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For years, I made my children listen to Bing Crosby as we decorated the Christmas tree. One day, I reasoned, I would be gone and I imagined them downloading 'ole Bing and carrying on the tradition with their own children.

When they got to the song, "Think of Me" they'd pause, shed a little tear, think of all the good times we had, and be sorry they complained incessantly about it so many years before.

Three years ago, my youngest child, Emma, died. She was 19 years old. I no longer put up a Christmas tree. Perhaps someday I will again. But I know I will never, ever again listen to Bing Crosby.

I don't presume that what I have done to get through three sets of holidays is right for others. Everyone's grief is different, and so is their path to survival. My mother died on New Year's Day. My sister is a nurse and plans to work. My dad wants to do everything exactly as it had been done when she was alive. My brother, the introvert, plans to stay home, alone with his own thoughts. Each person knows what he/she can handle and to the extent possible needs to create the space in which to handle it.

The human being has an amazing capacity to keep standing... an amazing will to keep living. "I'd never survive the loss of one of my children," I'd say knowingly whenever I'd hear about such a horror. "I'd simply curl up in a ball and die." But I didn't. I still wonder sometimes how it's possible that I am still breathing. But breathe I do. Every day, countless times a day.

The holidays are still the worst of times, perhaps because at one time they were the best of times. These things have helped me. I hope they help you whether you are grieving the loss of a parent, a friend, a beloved pet or heaven help you, a child.

1. **Don't ask too much of yourself.** You are not yourself. In some ways you will never be again. If you had lost a limb, you would not expect to go on as you had before. The first year, I didn't cook Thanksgiving dinner or shop for Christmas presents. I had other children, sure. But I didn't have Emma and that defined me. I gave IOU's for a family vacation to the other kids. It was easy and they were happy. If I had young children, I would have asked friends and family to shop for me. They would have. For that first year anyhow, they understood. Ask for help. You'll get it. People want to help. They can't bring your loved one back, but they'll do anything else they can. They'll be thankful they could do something meaningful for you.

2. **Reshape traditions.** We used to share what we were most thankful for over dessert at Thanksgiving. We used to eat at the dining room table for special occasions. We used to put up a Christmas tree and open presents in the same spot in our living room. We hung stockings on our coat rack because Santa was ridiculously generous with stocking stuffers and they would fall off the mantle. We used to buy chocolate-covered strawberries for Valentines. They were Emma's favorites. We stopped doing those things. But over time, we started doing other things. We go to Christmas brunch. We have selected new seats for present opening in the family room. We don't hang stockings, we don't put up a tree, we don't use the dining room. But we have created new traditions that make sense for the reshaped family we have become. We have begun to look forward to these traditions.

3. **Find ways to include the ones you have lost.** This Christmas, the first without my mother, I will make her favorite Christmas cookie which will forever now be dubbed Bobbie's pecan bars. Last Christmas, I bought presents for Emma's dad and siblings that were inspired by her — we see her in the shape of a star and a cardinal and, once you start to look, you see them everywhere. I wrote little notes in her voice. They were the hit of the holidays and all are proudly displayed in special places. I can't wait to look for other Emma gifts this year. Spend part of the holidays looking for signs. You'll see them. This year on Thanksgiving morning, I looked out the kitchen window and there were literally dozens of cardinals all over the garden and in nearly every branch of the tree we planted the first year in Emma's honor. We laughed — yes, laughed — and speculated that Emma must have taught all of her friends to become cardinals too just so they could party at the Mebane house.

4. **Say her name. Tell stories about him.** One of the common reactions I've heard from friends who have suffered loss is that no one talks about the person they've lost. They somehow believe that not doing so will help... that perhaps it will be too painful for you to hear their names. Of course it's painful. But it's even more so to pretend they never existed. I want everyone to remember every aspect of Emma. I want to hear the stories I know over and over. I want to discover stories I don't know. I need to know she mattered to every person who ever knew her. Even after three years, her best friends still post on her Facebook and I answer every one of them usually thanking them for "keeping Emma in your heart." People will take their cue from you. Talk about what you love most, miss most, makes you the saddest, makes you the happiest. Say her name and others will too.

5. **Take time for you.** I have found that I need much more "me" time than I did before Emma died. I get tired more often, especially after time with family and friends. I take naps frequently. I often leave work to take a walk or just sit by myself in the lounge. I'm not the conversationalist I used to be. I am comfortable

with silence. Me time may be tough to find during the holidays, but it's essential that you recognize when you need it and act on that need.

6. **Allow yourself to be sad but also to experience joy.** It's okay to cry. Christmas will always make me sad — my mom's death shadows memories of my own childhood; Emma's death shadows the present and the children she will never have will shape the future. I plan for sadness and I embrace it when it comes. I sit down by myself and write a letter to Emma or listen to her favorite songs or replay the slide show we played at her funeral. I walk right into the pain rather than try to hold it off. But I try to embrace joy when it comes too and it does come. It will come for you. It may be filtered through the hole in your heart, but it will come. You will laugh again and it will likely be during a holiday when the love of family and friends can't help but make you smile. Your laughter, when it comes, will be the greatest gift you can give to others. They are taking their cue from you. Be authentic. To be anything else takes too much effort.

May memories of your loved one bring you some happiness during this holiday season.

Donna Mebane is the author of the award-winning, fact-based novel [Tomorrow Comes](#) – a daring coming-of-age book in which an ordinary teenager must come to terms with her own mortality, the loss of all she once knew, and an other-worldly set of rules. The “ordinary” teenager is Donna's own daughter, Emma, who died suddenly and inexplicably in her sleep in July 2011. You can read more about Emma, Donna, and the family's efforts to keep Emma ever present on their website, [starshinegalaxy.com](#). Donna's book is available on [Amazon here](#).