As daylight wanes and the air turns crisp and cool, people who are grieving the death of a loved one usually dread the approaching holidays. In reality, though, holidays and significant days are peppered throughout the year, often catching grievers off guard. One man told me that last Halloween was a nightmare as his wife had been the decorator and the costume designer for their five children. As he attempted to greet trick-or-treaters, he was suddenly overcome by memories of Haloween past. Eventually he retreated indoors and turned off the porch light.

National holidays such as Memorial Day and Veterans Day can trigger pangs of sadness among families whose loved ones were in the military. Flag flying parades and patriotic music can feel superfluous when honoring a loved one’s service to our country. There are the significant days only your family observes, the birthdays, anniversaries and graduations that will now be celebrated without a loved one. And there are the not-so-happy dates that are forever etched in memory. Was it only a year earlier that you and your loved one heard the words metastatic cancer?

Suddenly the calendar feels like a dance through a field of landmines. What’s a griever to do? Here are a few ideas to help you on difficult days:

Choose your focus - When we’re grieving, our expectations of holidays and special days can lead to unnecessary stress. Recognizing and accepting that a holiday or a significant day isn’t going to be the same as in the past shows compassion for yourself and others. When you choose what’s important to you rather than letting others choose for you, you give yourself a much better chance of moving through a difficult day with less stress.

Respect your boundaries - As you choose your focus, consider also your boundaries. What can you do that feels safe and comfortable and what will cause worry and stress? For some people, it’s hard to eat, socialize or even to find energy to participate in activities. Other grievers find that being with people, food and activity either helps them handle their grief or enables them to briefly forget about it. Establishing healthy boundaries for yourself is an act of self-care that can keep you from intensifying the pain you feel and help you pace yourself as you find your “new normal.”

Accept help – In the same way you choose your focus and establish boundaries, allow others to help you. You don’t need to do everything you’ve done in the past. Asking for and accepting help especially during a significant day is truly an act of kind, thoughtful self-care. In fact, it is a gift to those that care about you and want to support you.

Jean
Special days & holiday help

Most people don’t intentionally set out to be unsupportive of a grieving family member. Even people who’ve been trained in grief and bereavement sometimes struggle with what to do or say. While many grievers turn to family and friends, they often fail to find the support they seek. With this in mind, we’d like to offer a few suggestions to support a grieving family member:

Support their choices - Whether the person who’s grieving has decided to fly to Hawaii, watch Netflix all day or do exactly the same thing they’ve always done, be supportive of their choices. While their choices may have an impact on you, try not to be too disappointed or concerned. Just because they do things differently this year doesn’t mean they will do things this way forever.

Invite, but don’t push. Extend invitations, but make it clear that you absolutely understand if they aren’t up to making an appearance. No one wants to be left off an invitation list because others assume they don’t want to participate. Extend an invitation knowing the person might not attend may provide the flexibility they appreciate.

Be prepared, plans might change. Whether a family member bails on a birthday party or at the last minute accepts an invitation they initially declined, be flexible and understanding. Grief is totally erratic and sometimes grievers don’t realize they don’t actually want to do what they thought they wanted to do (and vice versa). Support the changes they need to make.

Remember, grief doesn’t only impact the first holiday season. After the death of a loved one, grief is woven into a person’s holiday season. Many people will insinuate that your family member should be “over it” by the second or third holiday season. Even though things may be a little easier, some elements of a significant day or a holiday may still be very difficult. Provide the same kindness, support and consideration you did in the first year after the loss.

Book Review

Losing a loved one — whether a spouse, parent, sibling, child or friend — leaves people feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. Holidays and other special occasions often intensify the pain. A celebration of any kind forces the bereaved to again face the reality of a loved one’s absence.

In *The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions*, authors Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge and Robert C. De Vries know firsthand the sorrow of bereavement as each of them lost a spouse. Yet as they faced their pain and gleaned insights from their professions — Susan is a psychologist and Robert is a minister — they found renewed richness on special days that once brought heartache. *The Empty Chair* is a comforting blend of emotional support, spiritual guidance and personal experience to help readers honor loved ones on significant days and holidays.

Coping with Holidays Workshop

There’s no right or wrong way to survive holidays and special days but planning ahead and understanding your needs and limits can help. Learn strategies and coping techniques at one of our “Coping with the Holidays” workshops below. To register, please call (484) 526-2249:

**Thursday, November 8** from 6-8 p.m. at St. Luke’s Hospital-Allentown campus, 1736 Hamilton Street, Allentown, 18104.

**Wednesday, November 14** from 6-8 p.m. at St. Luke’s Hospital-Bethlehem campus, 801 Ostrum Street, Bethlehem, 18015.

**Tuesday, November 27** from 6-8 p.m. at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, 1700 St. Luke’s Blvd., Easton, 18045.
Healing Rhythms

Healing rhythms is a drumming group that provides a unique approach to reconciling loss and grief. The drum becomes the vehicle to express and articulate thoughts and feelings without words. Research indicates that drumming accelerates physical healing, boosts the immune system, releases emotional trauma and produces sensations of well-being. Drumming groups also provide a sense of connectedness to others who are grieving.

Our Healing Rhythms drumming group is led by a Remo HealthRhythms endorsed facilitator. Participants experience meditative drumming, guided imagery and inspirational readings about ways to traverse through loss.

The next drumming group will be held on six consecutive Saturday mornings from 10am to 12pm beginning on November 17th (Nov 17, Nov 24, Dec 1, Dec 8, Dec 15 and Dec 22). The group will meet at Lehigh Valley Friends Meetinghouse, 4116 Bath Pike (Route 512), Bethlehem 18017. To register for this 6-week session, please call 484-526-2499. For more information on the benefits of drumming, visit www.lvdrumcircle.com.

Newly Bereaved Workshop

The Newly Bereaved Workshop is designed to help participants understand the emotional, physical, social and spiritual impact of loss on us. These workshops help participants learn about grief reactions and coping strategies while honoring the uniqueness of their loss.

The next workshop will be held on Wednesday, October 17 from 6-8 pm at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, 1700 St. Luke’s Blvd., Easton, 18045 in the lower level conference room B. To register, please call (484) 526-2499.

Open/Drop-in Groups

Open/Drop-In Support Groups are designed to offer continued support to the bereaved who have already attended grief and loss programs through St. Luke’s Hospice. Open/Drop-In Groups enable participants the chance to receive and provide support in a collaborative environment. These groups are facilitated by a bereavement counselor but are directed by group members in terms of content and discussion. Currently we offer groups at the following locations:

**Easton:** First Monday of every month from 4-5 pm at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, Medical Office Building, 1700 St. Luke’s Blvd, Easton, 18045 in the lower level conference room A.

**Quakertown:** Second Monday of every month from 6-7 pm at St. Luke’s Hospital-Quakertown Campus, 1021 Park Avenue, Quakertown, 18951 in the cafeteria conference room.

Service of Remembrance

Our Services of Remembrance are offered throughout the year as a way to reflect, remember and celebrate the lives and legacies of the people who died on St. Luke’s Hospice service. These services are interfaith in nature and enable families and hospice staff to reunite.

The next Service of Remembrance will be held on Sunday, December 2nd at 3 p.m. at Wesley United Methodist Church, 2530 Center Street in Bethlehem, PA 18015. The names of the patients who died between July 1 and October 31, 2018 will be read aloud and invitations will be mailed to families this fall.
Additional Places to Find Support and to Share Your Story

This is a list of free bereavement services in the area. Please call the bereavement office at 484-526-2499 if you are in need of something more or for referrals to other services.

Adult Support Information

Bradbury Sullivan LGBT Community Center – The center offers a professionally led monthly bereavement support group for LGBT people who have experienced loss. The group meets on the 4th Wednesday of each month from 5:30-7:00 pm. Please register with Ariel@bradburysullivancenter.org.

Doylestown Hospital Hospice offers a variety of support groups. Visit www.dhospice.com or call 215-345-2079.

Gentle Yoga for Grief, Stress and Life Transitions is offered by Wendy Littner Thompson, M.Ed., LPC, RYT. Please contact her at 610-730-1992 or visit her website at www.givinggriefavoice.com to learn more. Let her know if your loved one was a St. Luke’s Hospice patient.

Grief Share is a faith-based grief support group program. Several locations are provided within the Lehigh Valley. Visit www.griefshare.org to find a location near you.

Grand View Hospital Hospice offers many groups and services that change seasonally. Please call 215-453-4210 for more information.

GRASP is for families whom have experienced death due to substance abuse. The support group meets at the 1st Presbyterian Church in Allentown, room 118 on the first Monday of the month at 12 noon. Please register with Jenny Kemps at 610-422-8490 or email jenkemps@ptd.net. A second group meets on the third Monday of the month from 7-8:30 pm. Please register with Nancy Howe at 484-788-9440 or email nancyhowe@ymail.com.

Healing Hearts Loss, Grief and Bereavement Center in Emmaus is offering two 6-week survivors of suicide loss support groups, one for adults and one for teens beginning Wednesday, September 5, 2018 from 6-7 pm. Please call 610-421-8625 to register. Suggested $10 donation.

HALOS — CLC (Hope After a Loved One’s Suicide – Child Loss Chapter) is for parents, grandparents and adult siblings who have experienced loss of a child or sibling to suicide. The group meets on the 4th Thursday of the month from 6:30–8:30 pm at Hughes Library in Stroudsburg, PA. Call to register with Alice Keyes at 570-236-1168 or email alicekeys00@gmail.com.

Lehigh Valley Health Network offers many groups and services that change seasonally. Please call 215-453-4210 for more information.

The Compassionate Friends offers ongoing support groups for parents, grandparents and adult siblings grieving the loss of a child, grandchild or sibling. Visit their website at www.thecompassionatefriends.org or contact these local chapters: Lehigh Valley (484-597-0240), Quakertown (267-380-0130) and Easton (610-866-5468).

Virtual Grief Support is offered by Dr. Don Eisenhauer. Don has a background in counseling and pastoral ministry and he runs monthly tele-grief groups and chat room support. Participants either dial in via phone or log in via computer to speak and share with other grievers. For more information about the dates and times for these opportunities, contact Don at onlinesupportcommunity@gmail.com.

VNA Hospice of Monroe County provides an adult support group to anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one within the past year. These groups are held on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of the month from 12:00 noon—1:30 pm at 502 VNA Road, Route 447, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301. Please call 570-421-5390 to learn more.

Pocono VNA offers a support group for those who have experienced the death of a loved one within the past 12 months. These groups are held on 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of the month at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Fish Hill Rd., Tannersville, PA 18372. The group begins at 7:00 pm. Call 570-629-1992 for more information.

Support Information for Children

Lehigh Valley Health Network offers “Stepping Stones for Children” for ages 6 through 17. This is a combination of education, activities and support to help facilitate healthy grieving with others who are the same age. Please call 610-402-7481 to register. The group meets at 2024 Lehigh Street, Allentown, PA 18103.

Support Information in New Jersey

Karen Ann Quinlan Hospice 800-882-1117 www.kareannquinlanhospice.org/services/bereavement