

**TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS**



# **New Traditions and Tips for the Holidays**

**TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE  
PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS**



800-959-TAPS (8277)  
[www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org)

**WENDT CENTER**  
FOR LOSS AND HEALING



# Presenters

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# Why is it important to talk about grief?

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# What is Grief and Loss?



- **Loss:**
  - The absence of something cherished
  - Physical or symbolic loss
- **Grief:**
  - The normal response to loss or death
- **Complicated Grief:**
  - Acute grief that can become a chronic conditions that worsens over time





# Common Reactions to Grief



- Increased sadness, negativity, and anxiety
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Depleted energy
- Over generalizing life situation
- Easily agitated
- Physical symptoms
- Substance use
- Reflection about grief, loss, changes, memories, and hopes for the future





# Common Reactions in Children and Teens



- Feelings of anger, confusion and desertion
- Feelings of responsibility and guilt about the loss
- Heightened anxiety over the safety of other family members
- Adolescents may suppress emotions
- Aggression or withdrawal
- Somatic complaints (headache, nausea)
- Try to avoid euphemisms for death as this can make it difficult for the child to understand what happened
- Give children the option of attending the wake or funeral if they would like



# Grief...What is Normal?



- It is normal to grieve the loss of your loved one especially during the holidays.
- There is no such thing as “how you should feel.” Everyone’s grief is unique.
- There is nothing wrong with thinking about and remembering your loved one during this time of the year.
- Now is the time for you to begin new traditions for yourself and your family as you cope with your loss.





# Dana's Story



“I have to put on a happy face and pretend that I am okay, but I can't forget the fact that Thanksgiving is about family and Christmas is about children. After the death of my son, how can I ever be happy and 'merry' about the holidays again?”







# The Holidays Can Be Stressful: Triggers



- Relationships -- conflicts/misunderstandings/hurt feelings.
- Family dynamics -- how one experiences a loss of a loved one is often directly related to the relationship. Loss affects all members of the family but not all in the same way.
- Everyone grieves differently. Show grace to yourself and those around you. There is no “right way” to grieve.
- Traditions change when the family system loses someone; for example: decorating the tree may feel different than it did prior to the death.
- Sights, sounds, and smells are major triggers for our memory! Many of the things that are associated with what makes the holidays such a special time.



# The Holidays Can Be Stressful: Triggers



- Physical demands
  - compromised immune system and exhaustion
  - managing all the tasks of the holiday and planning
  - not eating properly or sleeping well
- Finances
  - not having enough money for gifts, food, travel, entertainment

*“Grief is like the ocean, it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn how to swim.”*

*-- Vicki Harrison*



# Grief, Loss, Illness and the Holidays - Common Reactions



- Increased sadness
- Increased negativity
- Increased anxiety
- Depleted energy
- Over generalizing life situation
- Easily agitated
- Physical ailments
- Withdrawing from friends and family, loneliness
- Substance use (numb, withdraw, temporary relief)
- Overindulgence
- Conversely: Reflective about gratefulness, choices, changes, death and losses, memories, and hopes for the future





# Plan Ahead



*Don't allow the holidays to simply happen.*

*Plan ahead for the best outcome.*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>I anticipate that <u>FAMILY DINNER AT AUNT K's</u> will be challenging.</p> <p>To prepare myself, I will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ MAKE A PLAN TO ARRIVE &amp; LEAVE WITH TOM</li> <li>❖ ONLY DRINK 2 GLASSES OF WINE WITH DINNER</li> <li>❖ ASK TO SIT NEXT TO MY BROTHER</li> </ul> | <p>I anticipate that <u>END OF THE YEAR DEADLINES AT WORK</u> will be challenging.</p> <p>To prepare myself, I will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ MAKE A CALENDAR OF IMPORTANT DATES</li> <li>❖ FIND TASKS I CAN DELEGATE TO MY TEAM</li> <li>❖ GET TO BED BY 10:15PM</li> </ul> |
| <p>I anticipate that <u>BUYING GIFTS</u> will be challenging.</p> <p>To prepare myself, I will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ MAKE A BUDGET</li> <li>❖ LIMIT MYSELF TO 1 GIFT A PERSON</li> <li>❖ SPREAD OUT MY SHOPPING &amp; BE IN STORES BY 10AM</li> </ul>                                | <p>I anticipate that <u>ALONE TIME</u> will be challenging.</p> <p>To prepare myself, I will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ SEE MY FRIENDS AT LEAST ONCE</li> <li>❖ MAKE A MASSAGE APPOINTMENT ON MY FIRST AFTERNOON OFF</li> <li>❖ STAY OFF SOCIAL MEDIA</li> </ul>              |



# Performing at Your Ability



Accept limitations and don't beat yourself up for not having the holiday you think you “should” have.



# Ask for Help



Ask those around you for help with preparations for the holidays – shopping, cooking, etc.



# Tell People How You Are Feeling



Let people know you are struggling and tell them how they can best help you.

- Do you need company?
- Do you need time to yourself?
- Do you need for people NOT to ask you how are you doing?
- Do you need to have no “new” people introduced during the holiday?





# Be Gentle With Yourself



You might think you will be fine and all of a sudden something (a song, a smell, etc.) brings a flood of memories back. It's okay to let yourself cry and change your plans if need be.



# Eliminate or Create New Rituals

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If certain rituals are too emotionally difficult, leave them out this year. Consider adding a new holiday tradition.





# Ideas for New Rituals



- Introduce a new dish to your family's holiday table- maybe a favorite food/recipe of your loved one
- Volunteer or give a donation to a non-profit that somehow represents your loved one
- Ask all friends and family to commit a random act of kindness and share it with you then share all of the random acts before or after your holiday meal
- Choose a favorite song of your loved one and play it at some point throughout the day
- Light a candle in honor of your loved one and have it burning the entire day
- Place a decorated box or basket in a family gathering space; write a memory on a piece of paper and leave it there



## Including children and teens in the process



- Allow children and teens to be part of the process of remembering
  - Spend time looking through photo albums and talking about memories during the holidays.
  - Make a gift for the loved one that has died or write a holiday card to them.
  - Create a keepsake that commemorates their loved one.





# Talk About Your Loved One



It's healthy to talk about your loved one and tell stories about them.





# Choose Your Company Wisely



Try to be around people who are supportive and understanding during the holiday season.





# Watch Out for Quick Fixes



It can be tempting to rely on alcohol, drug abuse, overspending, etc. as a way to cope with challenging feelings. Be wary of coping methods that will leave you feeling worse in the long run.





# Practice Gratitude



Try to continually look for things that you appreciate or feel grateful for (even if they are small).

Consider keeping a gratitude journal and writing down a few things you appreciate during the week.





## Taking Care Of Yourself, FIRST



Realize that grieving your loved one during the holidays is a very emotional and exhausting process, but it is part of your healing.

You can get through it.



## The William Wendt Center for Loss & Healing



- Individual and Group Counseling
- RECOVER: Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
- Resilient Scholars School Program
- Crime Victim Services
- Domestic Violence
- Crisis Response
- Camp Forget-Me-Not/  
Camp Erin
- Lights of Hope Program
- Military Family Counseling
- Sexual Assault/  
Trauma counseling



## The William Wendt Center for Loss & Healing



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The Wendt Center offers FREE counseling to military, veterans, and their family members in Washington, DC. TAPS can connect you.



# TAPS

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## 1-800-959-TAPS (8277)

*24-hour National Military Survivor Helpline*

Compassionate care to all those grieving the death of a military loved one

Peer-based Support

Casework Assistance

Connections to Grief and Trauma Counseling

Survivor Retreats and Camps

National/Regional Survivor Seminars



# Questions?