

# **Handling the Holidays**

**WHEN A LOVED ONE HAS DIED**

An Activity Book for Kids and Those Who Care for Them

**Robyn J. Plocher, M.Div.**

**Handling the Holidays When a Loved One Has Died:  
An Activity Book for Kids and Those Who Care for Them**

**By Robyn J. Plocher, M.Div.**

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**With Appreciation to the Children  
and  
Volunteers of Rick's House of Hope**

**Some activities in this book are adapted from TLC Institute, [www.starrtraining.org/tlc](http://www.starrtraining.org/tlc)**

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

Adults often think of children as being “resilient” or “too young to understand death and grief.” The truth is, some children are resilient, just as some adults are. Yet all children are vulnerable to feelings of sadness, depression, anger, fear and anxiety when someone they love dies. Any child old enough to laugh and experience pleasure is also old enough to experience the pain of grief. While children may not understand death in the same way adults do, they feel the same feelings of grief when a loved one dies. In addition, they are very concerned when they know the people who care for them and love them are in pain.

It is most frightening for children to have the truth withheld from them when they know intuitively that something is wrong or something has changed in their homes. At the time of a death in the family, parents and other caregivers should speak to children truthfully using language appropriate for their age and development to tell them that a loved one has died. It is appropriate for parents to share their beliefs about what happens to a loved one after death. It is also wise to acknowledge the feelings that people have when a loved one dies. For example, feelings of sadness because we miss them and feelings of happiness and joy when we remember the special times we have shared. Adults should avoid the use of euphemisms, such as telling the child that their loved one is sleeping. Children are very literal and concrete thinkers. They may come to associate sleep with the ultimate separation of death or be confused as to why their loved one won't wake up and play with them.

When someone we love has died, the holidays can be overwhelming for adults. Adults may choose to seek comfort in rituals and traditions of the past. Or they may choose to limit their holiday celebration in some way. This book was created to help the children in your family connect with positive memories of past holiday celebrations, including memories of the loved one who has died. It will help them express any ambiguous feelings they may have or may be picking up from the adults around them about this particular holiday season. It will empower them to express their needs and desires related to family holiday observances.

The book was also designed to act as a tool to encourage communication between you, the caregiver, and the children you care for. You are encouraged to share the experience of completing this book with your child. Alternatively, you may have them share the book with you when they have completed it. If you have any questions or concerns about the needs of your grieving child during the holiday season, or at any other time, please feel free to contact me through the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children at 1-877-306-5256 or [www.starrtraining.org/tlc](http://www.starrtraining.org/tlc).

Sincerely,

Robyn J. Plocher

Dear Friend,

When I was about your age my Grandpa became suddenly ill and later died in the hospital. At first, it didn't seem like I felt anything at all. Then on the day of the funeral I heard one of my cousins say, "Christmas will never be the same without Grandpa." A flood of memories rushed through my head as I remembered how we always got together with Grandma and Grandpa for Christmas. Grandpa always had a shiny silver dollar in his pocket for each of us grandkids, in addition to our wrapped presents under the tree. We also had a tradition in our family that the men, like my dad and Grandpa, washed the dishes after a holiday meal. They were just little things really, but they were little things that made special memories for me and my family at the holidays. And, they were special memories that had always included Grandpa. Like my cousin, I just couldn't imagine Christmas without Grandpa.

Someone you love has died. Like me, you may be wondering how the holidays will be different this year. You may feel sad to think that your loved one will not be here to celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas or Passover this year. You may wonder if it is all right to be happy and excited about the holiday season when others in your life seem very sad.

I want you to know that all of your feelings are okay. This book is a special place where you can write about and draw your special memories of past holidays and your feelings about this holiday season. Please take time to share this book with an important and trusted adult in your life. They will want to know how you are feeling. Sharing your feelings together will help your family to come up with a plan to make this holiday season special even though your loved one is not physically here to share it with you.

My wish for you and your family is a holiday season of peace and love.

Your Friend,

Robyn Plocher

**This is a picture of me having fun with \_\_\_\_\_ .**  
(person who died)

**This is my family celebrating Thanksgiving.**

**The best part of Thanksgiving is \_\_\_\_\_**

**This is my family celebrating** \_\_\_\_\_  
(Christmas, Hanukah or other holiday)

**My favorite holiday memory is**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**A sad thing happened this year in your family. Someone you loved has died. Holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas feel different when someone we love has died. We miss that person. Our happy feelings of celebration and our sad feelings of missing them get all mixed up inside us. Our parents and other family members may be feeling these same mixed up feelings inside, also.**

**On this page you may draw or write your biggest worry about the holidays this year.**

**This is my biggest worry about the holidays:**

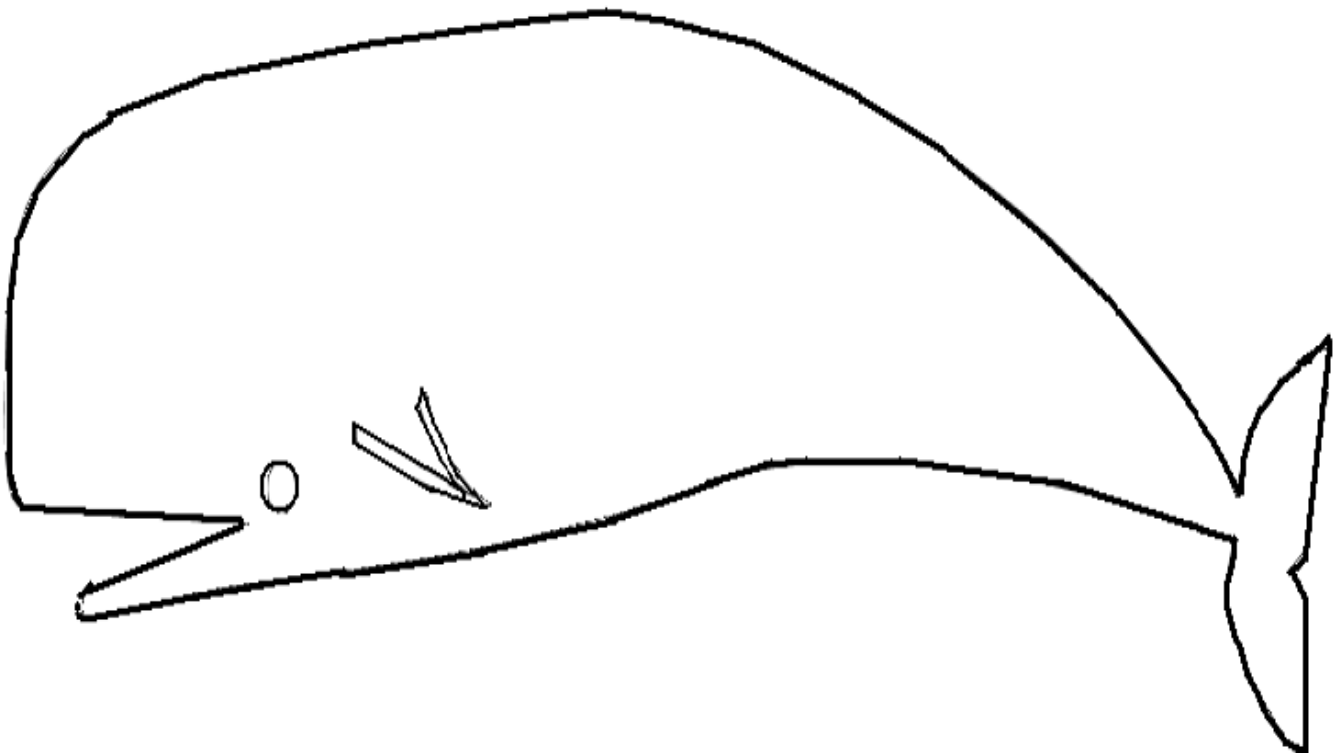
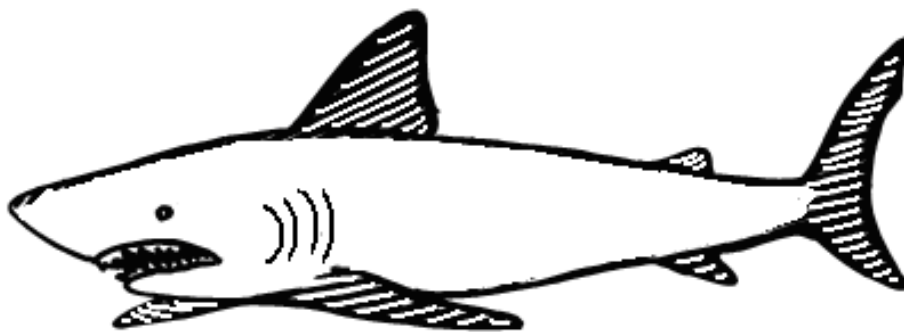
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**This is how big my worry is:**

**Color the fish that shows how big your worry is.**



**Directions: Color in the letters of the word below in your favorite holiday colors.**

**TRADITION**

**Tradition is a big word that means something we do the same way and at the same time. Holidays are a special time when people think about traditions. One family may have the tradition of opening gifts on Christmas morning. Another may have the tradition of opening gifts on Christmas Eve.**

**One family may always have Grandma's pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving because that is their tradition. Another family may always have Aunt Mary's cranberry-pecan pie at Christmas because that is their tradition. Still another family may light a menorah at Hanukah because that is their tradition.**

**Think about the traditions that are most important in your family. Then, on the next page, draw a picture to show your family what traditions you would like to keep this year.**

**GO TO THE NEXT PAGE**

## **My Favorite Tradition**

**Dear** \_\_\_\_\_,  
(parent, guardian or whoever you celebrate the holidays with)

**This is a picture of something special we do during the holidays. I like it a lot, and hope we will do it this year, too.**

**Love,**

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Your name)

**Now that you have completed the pages of this book, be sure to share your pictures with your parent, guardian or another family member you see during the holidays. Tell them about the pictures you have drawn. Let them know what you are thinking and feeling about the holidays this year. Tell them any worries you may have.**

**On this page you can draw a picture of the person, or people, you want to share this book with.**

## TIPS AND ACTIVITIES FOR COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS AFTER LOSS

- **Parents and Caregivers, take care of yourself first.** When the flight attendant reviews safety instructions on an airplane, he always instructs adults to put the oxygen mask on themselves **BEFORE** they assist children or disabled individuals. You can't be of help and support to others if you are neglecting your own needs. Your children will learn self-care and coping skills from what they observe in you.
- **Don't expect others to just know what you need.** Communicate, discuss and make decisions together whenever possible.
- **Make Thanksgiving more than a one day observance,** make thanksgiving a way of life. Current research supports the existence of a correlation between an attitude of gratitude and one's cardiovascular and immune system function. Take time at the end of each day to write down three to five things you experienced that day for which you are grateful or by which you have been blessed. Be watchful for those things that touch you, inspire you or surprise you each day.
- **Help others.** Reaching out to others in need is a good way to get a little perspective on your own situation and distract yourself from the feelings and tasks that seem overwhelming. Get the kids involved. Visit someone in the nursing home. Help prepare a meal at the Salvation Army or a homeless shelter. Bake cookies or make home-made gifts for a shut-in or family that is struggling financially.
- **Honor your loved one's memory.** You may want to make a charitable donation to a meaningful cause to honor your loved one's memory. You may also honor your loved one's memory by participating in special services organized by your funeral home or other organizations, such as hospice programs.
- **Make or decorate a candle** to light in memory of your loved one during the holidays.
- **Make a picture frame-ornament** for the Christmas tree. Craft sticks, glitter, glue and other items can be used as well as a photo of your loved one. Use a pipe stem cleaner to make a hanger for the ornament. You will be creating a special family memory and a way to honor your loved one's role in your child's life year after year.
- **Create a "stained glass" candle holder:** Before you begin collect one clean glass jar (salsa or mayonnaise work well). Tear or cut small pieces of multi-colored tissue paper to cover the jar. Using a foam craft brush spread Mod Podge craft glue over about half of the outside of the jar. Paste on pieces of tissue paper quickly, because Mod Podge dries fast. Do not worry about being neat. The colors look beautiful when they overlap. Now turn the jar around and work on the other half, repeating the process until the jar is covered. Finally, you may paste tissue hearts, trees, stars or other holiday images on top of the tissue. Add a final coat of Mod Podge to the decorated jar. Let the jar air dry for at least one hour. When dry you may desire to tie a bow to the rim of the jar. You now have a lovely "stained glass" candle holder for the holidays. Your candle may be lit to symbolize the presence of your loved one who has died and the beauty of your memories of him/her.
- **Everything is OPTIONAL this year.** Because of your loss, things will already seem very different or strange. If you set aside some customs or traditions this year, it doesn't mean you will never come back to them in the future. It just means that you do not have the energy or desire to do them this year. There is no "right way" or "wrong way" to mark the holidays after loss. There is only what is right for your family.