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When you're grieving at Christmas, seeing the merriment of other people can feel like watching a pantomime from the very back row. You can hear the laughter and joy around you, but it's impossible to get lost in it. The distance feels too great, you feel wholly removed. Occasionally, you might experience a fleeting moment of happiness, yet you always return to being an outsider looking in, feeling like everyone else is sharing in something that you just can't engage with.

This year especially, many of us will be mourning. Whether we've lost loved ones to Covid-19 itself, or experienced the death of a family member or friend during lockdown, the pandemic has changed the way we are able to grieve, taking away our rituals and not allowing for closure.

'It's like normal grief, but with the volume turned up,' says [Julia Samuel](#) MBE, psychotherapist, grief specialist and author of *This Too Shall Pass*. 'The particular lens that Covid brings is that it's a sudden and unexpected death, and the person probably couldn't visit their loved one before they died. The task of mourning is to face the reality of the death – but the loss of rituals as a result of Covid makes it feel surreal, so people are left suspended.'

'On many levels, our memories are living and embodied, so they're more than just a thought,' adds Samuel. 'The body remembers; the body keeps the score, so every happy Christmas you had up to this point with the person who's died is very present and, of course, will magnify your sadness. You will see the way they sat at the dining room table, or the spot on the sofa where they opened presents. Now, there's a space where they're no longer there. For most of our days, we don't have clear memories, they all string along together, but people remember Christmas because it's a very particular day.'

'Grief is such a complex experience, and what makes it really difficult at this time of year is that, whether you're religious or not, Christmas is everywhere, and there's no getting away from it,' explains psychologist Dr Roberta Babb, founder of The Hanover Centre. 'People who are grieving are often quite numb and confused about what's happening because, externally, they're presented with a joyous, happy family coming together, but internally, they might be feeling very different. They may be overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings, from sadness, to anger at seeing other people having a joyous time when their loved one is not there, to denial and anxiety about the future.'

So how can we navigate this difficult time of year – and how can we support our friends and relatives who are grieving?

ON  
LOVE  
AND  
LOSS

Even the happiest occasions become bittersweet if loved ones have been lost. We asked a psychotherapist and psychologist how to mourn, or support a grieving friend, this festive season





## IF YOU HAVE LOST SOMEONE...

'Treat yourself with compassion,' advises Dr Babb. 'At Christmas particularly, people will often make thinking errors when it comes to words such as 'should, must and ought to' – they should be enjoying themselves, for example, or they ought to snap out of it. The implication with these thoughts is that we've failed, which can leave us feeling even more distressed and guilty. Remind yourself that all emotions are important, because they give us information. They tell us about how we feel, or our response to an event or interaction. Allow yourself the space to feel those feelings rather than pushing them down.'



*'Allow yourself to feel,' advises Dr Roberta Babb.*

'All of us want to be able to Marie Kondo our feelings, to sort them out and not feel the pain,' says Samuel. 'But pain is the agent of change. Pain is the thing that allows us in the end to heal through grief. And so we have to support ourselves to feel the pain and to go through that natural process. Journalise it. Let the words tumble out on paper. Exercise also really helps, because grief feels like fear, and fear sets your body on alert. So if you go for a fast walk in the cold, that shifts the cortisol that tells you you're looking for danger, and it calms you. Breathing exercises are useful, too – breathe in for seven, out for 11.'

'Throughout Christmas Day, you will feel waves of grief that overwhelm, but when this happens, go outside, walk around and let yourself feel the sadness. Try self soothing – patting yourself on the chest and saying out loud: "It's so sad, I really miss him/her." – and then go back inside. You have to let the waves wash over you. After that, switch your attention to the people around you and connect with them. Have a hug, if you can, or make yourself a cup of tea so that you're doing things that help regulate your system.'

Though you may feel alone, maintaining connections is crucial. 'Think about how you can connect with others in a similar situation,' says Dr Babb, 'for example, through forums or watching videos of people sharing similar stories online.'



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Samuel agrees that openness, though challenging, is the key to managing on the day. 'You could come up with a plan with your family,' she says. 'Acknowledge that you'll feel sad and work out a strategy, such as finding a space in the house to go to for some alone time. You could read a poem together, light a candle, make a playlist or wear an item of clothing or some jewellery belonging to the person who is no longer there. Touchstones to memory provide comfort while also acknowledging the absence.'

'It's about changing the relationship with your memories,' says Dr Babb. 'People often think about death in terms of loss, but in many cultures it's an opportunity to celebrate and be grateful for the time you had with that person and what they taught you. You might make a photo album, or you might write a letter to them, letting them know how you feel. If you have Christmas dinner, you could make that person's favourite dish to honour them, leave an empty seat at the table, do a toast or donate to a charity that is linked to the bereavement in some way. It's about not being scared to bring that person into the here and now. People often worry that this will be upsetting, but not to acknowledge the loss is even more painful.'

## IF SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS GRIEVING...

It can be difficult to know how to support someone going through bereavement; what to say and how to act, particularly at Christmas. 'Often people are frightened of getting it wrong, so they say nothing, but that

is the very worst thing to do, not to acknowledge it,' says Samuel. 'You can never go wrong by saying, "I'm sorry."'

'The biggest gift you can give the person is listening. Don't ask tons of questions, just be with them. One of

the difficulties with grief is that it's embodied, meaning people send out bodily signals of pain. Often, the person sitting with them feels that pain and they find it unbearable, so they want to try to fix it. They'll say things like: 'I know what we're going to do, we're going to go on



*'Just being there helps,' says Julia Samuel.*

holiday, get you a massage, find you a boyfriend.' But actually, just to sit with them and let them be where they're at is a huge help. The person who is grieving is the expert on themselves – so it's important not to make assumptions about what they want.'

## 'STRENGTH ISN'T ALL ABOUT DOING; SOMETIMES, IT IS ABOUT BEING AND FEELING'

Dr Babb agrees: 'Strength isn't always about doing. Sometimes, strength is about being and feeling. Grief is a forced change where someone doesn't have control, so when it comes to Christmas, you can help that person by allowing them the choice to say yes or no to an invitation. Ensure they know it's okay to change their mind. Equally, don't shy away from normality. Sometimes, that person may not want to talk specifically about the bereavement, so make sure you still tell them about what you're doing at Christmas, or other day-to-day happenings. This will help them to feel connected, reminding them that their life still has meaning and purpose.'

When spending Christmas with someone who's

grieving, be led by them, Dr Babb advises. 'Acknowledge it. Be curious. Give the person the opportunity to talk about their lost loved one – stories are a lovely way to remember. If you spot someone is struggling, invite them to pop outside with you or to help you in the kitchen to give them the opportunity to step away from the hubbub of the day. Use your intuition.'

'People often ask me how long the grieving process takes, and I always reply, "Longer than you want."' says Samuel. 'We tend to have a mental calendar of how long we think someone needs to "get over it". But grieving isn't something that you just get over. It's a process of adaptation. You learn to accommodate, shifting and turning into this new reality that you didn't want and you haven't chosen. Christmas is the time when people disappear to their busy lives, but keep in mind that your friend or relative is still mourning. Keep sending them messages. Keep suggesting therapeutic walks, phone calls, or pub lunches. Above all, love them. When one love dies, it's the love of others that makes the biggest difference of all.'

• To find out more, visit [juliasamuel.co.uk](http://juliasamuel.co.uk) and [hanovercentre.com](http://hanovercentre.com)

## Where to find support this Christmas

### CRUSE BEREAVEMENT CARE

offers online help and advice as well as a phone helpline and local services, both on the phone and face to face. Visit [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

### SAMARITANS

provides 24-hour support, 365 days of the year. Visit [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

### COUNSELLING DIRECTORY

allows you to search for specialists offering face-to-face, phone and online therapy. Visit [counselling-directory.org.uk](http://counselling-directory.org.uk)

### THE BLACK, AFRICAN AND ASIAN THERAPY NETWORK

is the UK's largest independent organisation that specialises in working psychologically with people who identify as Black, African, South Asian and Caribbean. Visit [baatn.org.uk](http://baatn.org.uk)

### PSYCHOLOGY TODAY UK

provides a wide range of articles and advice, as well as a counsellor directory and support group finder. Visit [psychologytoday.com/gb/](http://psychologytoday.com/gb/)

WORDS: ELLA DOVE. PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY