

How to Remember a Loved One on Special Days

During the weeks, months and even years after a loved one dies, there may be days and dates that have special meaning to you. Sometimes these days may sneak up on you and surprise you, like the day of the first snowfall of the year or the first time you attend a certain event on your own. Other days or dates may loom ahead on the horizon and you may find yourself planning for them or even dreading their arrival many months in advance.

While birthdays, wedding anniversaries or major holidays are expected to be difficult, other days or seasons may be special to your relationship and memories of your loved one, like hunting season in the fall, or the date when you first met.

Listed below are a few suggestions for coping with anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, or other special dates and seasons after your loved one died. Please consider these as suggestions only – you and your family may have wonderful and meaningful ideas already in mind.

- Wrap a favorite keepsake or a framed picture of your loved one and give it as a gift to another grieving family member.
- Decorate a candle and light it at meal time in memory of your loved one. Leave the candle burning during your time together as a family.
- Make a scrapbook of pictures and special items about your loved one to give or simply to share with one another. This is a good activity for children as well.
- Make a donation to a favorite charity in the person's honor.
- Create a scholarship in memory of your loved one and announce it at a holiday gathering of family and friends.
- Purchase a book – perhaps a favorite of your loved one – and donate it to your local library or school. Ask your librarian to place a label in the front cover inscribed, "In memory of (your loved one's name)."
- Bring a loved one's favorite food to share at a holiday dinner. Mention their name in the blessing over the food or propose a toast to their memory.
- Share favorite stories about the person who died. Sometimes others need permission to talk about the person who died. Let them know you would rather keep the memory of your loved one alive than pretend nothing has changed.
- Encourage grieving children to draw pictures and create gifts inspired by their memories to give to other family members.
- If you visit the grave of your loved one, consider buying flowers for yourself to keep at home, as well as flowers for the gravesite.
- Then once you've remembered your loved one, make sure you remember yourself. Take care of yourself. Be gentle. Do what you can do – no more and no less.

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It is common for griever to make permanent note of the date of death of a loved one and then find they notice this date, month after month. One patient of ours coined a term for this date, "month-a-versary."

For example, if your loved one passed away on the first of the month, then the first of each month may be a significant date for many months to come. These "month-a-versaries" may gradually hold less significance for you as the months go by, but in the meantime these could be special opportunities for slowing down and honoring your grief process.

While there are dates and events that our society generally recognizes as joyous occasions, like birthdays, wedding anniversaries and graduations, during a time of grieving these same events may be sad reminders of a loved one's absence.

There may also be other "anniversaries" that are not as openly recognized, such as the season when your loved one was diagnosed with a serious illness, or the date of when she or he was admitted into hospice care. Remember that it is normal and natural to have intense emotions as these dates approach and arrive.

When advising our patients on how to best cope with upcoming days and dates of significance, we tend to suggest that they do something on purpose on or around the date.

Take time to carefully consider what you would like to do on that day, and what would best suit both your emotional needs and the memory of your loved one. Talk with someone you trust about your concerns for the upcoming day. Pray, meditate, or journal about your ideas and hopes for that day if you would rather not discuss the topic.

Finally, make a plan for the day to do something intentional to care for yourself and honor your loved one's memory. Remember, you can always change your mind or your plans at any time, but often having a plan in mind will help ease the anxieties about the upcoming day.