

Working through pain of loss brings Christmas back to life

By Judy Wark

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Not long ago, the holiday season was something I approached with dread.

In January 2004, my husband died of cancer, leaving me with three young children.

In the lead up to the first Christmas after his passing, all the joy that usually accompanied the holidays was replaced with pain.

I gave up trying to plan the perfect Christmas and booked the family on a last-minute holiday to Cuba. I told my travel agent to find me a beach and a buffet. In hindsight,

it was survival. The memory of my husband's dying at home was all too fresh.

The holidays are difficult for anyone coping with the loss of a loved one, especially for those with young families.

Colleen Clark, the child-youth and family services manager with Hospice Calgary, says the holidays are all about family and traditions.

"Every year, we see parents struggling to help their children while trying to manage their own grief," said Clark.

Clark suggests that families discuss how they can adapt celebrations according to their needs.

"Grieving is a tough and draining experience. We advise survivors to avoid planning the perfect holiday and only do what they need to make it through," said Clark.

When I took my family to Cuba, I packed an advent wreath, a tradition we always included in our celebrations. Lighting the candles allowed the

children to focus on what we still had while also honouring their father's memory.

The following Christmas, I took my husband's neckties and made a stocking from them. I invited the kids to write their father notes and place them in the stocking.

We created a new tradition while gradually returning to the ones we loved.

During the holidays, family and friends may avoid mentioning the deceased to protect the feelings of those hurting. Clark encourages survivors to talk about their loved ones and ask their guests to share favourite memories. Once I acknowledged my husband, then everyone, including the children, relaxed and the tension lifted.

My daughter Grace, then nine, was part of Hospice Calgary's Kids Club, a support group for grieving children. At one of the sessions, the children decorated a candle with a photo of their deceased parent. Now my children light that candle at our Christmas dinner.

These days, I look forward to Christmas. The grief of losing someone you love never ends, but it becomes less relentless and my family and I have learned to manage it.

As a widow and solo parent, I opt for simple, meaningful ways to celebrate. I focus on cherishing the memories and creating new ones.

Each year, Hospice Calgary hosts a workshop for grieving families on Coping with the Holidays. During the first three weeks of December, they will also be at Market Mall with the Tree of Love. The public is invited to inscribe a heart in memory of a loved one.

For information about Hospice Calgary's programs and services, go to www.hospicecalgary.com. Judy Wark is a Calgary writer, musician and actor. She is writing a book for young widows.

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