

## THE LOSS COUNSELING CENTER® OF WASHINGTON

3030 Q STREET, N.W.  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20007  
TEL: (202) 342-0124

### The Holiday Season: How to Survive Well and Heal Better

***In this holiday season, though inundated by the tragic and dramatic public loss of so many thousands by so many thousands, don't overlook your personal losses that predated September 11<sup>th</sup>. These tragic events may, in fact, distract you from focusing on the emotional work you need to do for your life by heightening or blending your emotions behind them. Your individual history of loss and grief is yours alone. It is important for your life to do the healing you have to do and to develop the coping skills you need to get through the holiday season well.***

The holiday season is not one you can hide from, as you might from birthdays, anniversaries, weekends and Washington's Birthday. The holiday season triggers multiple emotions, often contradictory, with layers of memories, fantasies, wants, needs and pains—sometimes, it seems, all at once. It is a time of year filled with fantasies of sugar plums dancing in your head, whether you're 5 or 85; fantasies or realities of family closeness, loneliness, close relationships, demands and expectations. There's no way and no where to escape from the demands of a season that expects and requires you to be happy.

Feelings of loss you may carry in you or the holiday season that spreads its message of happiness around you—each of these experiences evoke powerful demands that must be dealt with in some way by you. Each is stressful and engulfing, whether your reactions stem from your inner self or from the external hoopla of holiday. When they occur together during this long “pre-Thanksgiving through New Year's” holiday season, it is like igniting an emotional powder keg in you.

Most people are inexperienced with long-lasting and intense feeling states, and unwittingly react by becoming either more engulfed in their grief, by trying to drown themselves in the holiday season, or by denying their pain totally. However, these are not very effective solutions because the emotional after-effects are often devastating. A much better long-term solution for healing is based on the idea that your emotional reactions are a significant and meaningful communication from within yourself. You can learn how to work *with* your feelings rather than struggle *against* them.

Few people, if any, escape having to cope with loss. Beyond death and divorce, the most familiar losses, there are many other losses: loss of family, health, body part, favored pet, job, the sought for promotion, closeness in a special relationship, miscarriage, a personal dream, home, an internal sense of personal security due to violation (rape, robbery), etc.

Loss—and all the emotions that are part of sadness and grieving—is an intensely powerful experience. Most of us are ill-prepared to handle intense feelings stirred by loss and don't realize that it frequently takes years to heal.

Our self-expectations in coping with loss or grief are often unreasonable and, consequently, working through our grief is that much harder. Those of us who prematurely push our grief out of awareness may be overwhelmed and disappointed with ourselves when the holiday season brings again to the surface the feelings of grief we thought were gone.

Take these feelings very seriously for they are very important for you. Be glad that the holidays bring back these feelings that were pushed away and out of awareness too soon for healing. If you have used your emotional and physical energy to close off feelings, you have unwittingly handicapped yourself in a variety of life's situations. Out of sight is not out of impact on you. The results may be angry explosions at co-workers, difficulty concentrating on the job, isolation from friends, development of addictive behaviors, psychosomatic symptoms (i.e., the stress of the feelings you're withholding or avoiding produces an internal stress state), or clinical depression which may not appear for many years but which is tied to an unresolved loss.

We have an inner system that strives for health: an inherent knowledge of the emotions we need to allow ourselves to feel in order to heal. Our system knows what to do if we give it a chance and work with ourselves. Negative judgements of ourselves and our feelings, borne out of fear and loneliness and, too often, our desire to please and appease others, interfere with our inner knowledge and block our healing process. If you get fear and judgement out of the way, you will discover how much you know and healing, true healing, of your wounds can occur.

### ***Out of sight is not out of impact on you***

---

Painful emotions in these times of holiday are a powerful communication from you to you; not only of where you are wounded but that healing can still take place. Allow and accept your pain and the wide range of whatever emotions are yours. Don't fight them; work with them. Your emotions aren't neat and tidy and it is our capacity to feel, and to identify and work with our feelings, that is so much of what makes us human. You will learn to trust yourself.

And remember another important positive communication to yourself, a message that is too frequently overlooked: your loss reflects the depth of your ability for caring. The relationship you had to a person, a place, a pet, a job, a dream, while not now ongoing in a material sense, did exist and continues to exist in you! This is not something to flee from, to deaden in yourself. If you bury the grief rather than go through the pain, you lose far more than your awareness of the pain. You cut yourself off from that tender, caring, wanting, passionate part of yourself that can be transformed and can be expressed in other dreams, jobs, relationships. What healing will do in time is transform the pain of loss into the joy of what you had and still have within you.

Celia A. Ward, Ph.D.  
[www.losscounseling.com](http://www.losscounseling.com)  
e-mail: [drcelia@msn.com](mailto:drcelia@msn.com)