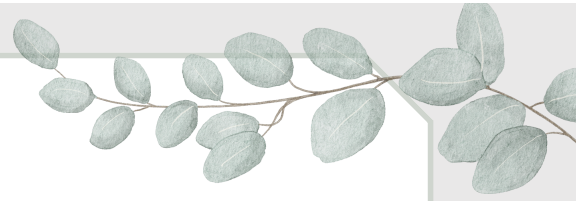




THE
BARNABAS
CENTER

Toolkit

Resources, Tools and Support for your Personal Journey



Counseling Toolkit

December 2025/January 2026

Grief, a Light in the Darkness

Why the Most Wonderful Time of the Year Can Be the Hardest

The holiday season is a wonderful time of the year, but it can also be very challenging too. Many of us are surrounded by people with parties and gatherings which may be difficult to manage if we are grieving the loss of a loved one. Or some of us dread this time of year because it brings up painful feelings of sadness, regret, and despair. Author Nicholas Wolterstorff says this about grief: *"Grief is a special kind of suffering. It's intensely wanting what you know cannot be."* How do we deal with our grief at the holidays but also celebrate the joy and hope of the season?

An Emotional Rollercoaster

First, let's understand what grief is exactly. Grief is a complex set of emotions that includes feelings of sadness, anger, regret, guilt, confusion, and fear. Grief can feel like riding an *"emotional rollercoaster."* We feel grief when we've lost something. Loss can take on many forms—it can come from a death, or losing your job, or when you get a devastating health diagnosis, or an unmet dream goes unfulfilled. We assumed our life would turn out differently, and feelings of frustration, sadness, and grief take over.

All emotions are important information about what's going on inside us. Different senses bring us news from our bodies, our minds, and the outside world. Our brain then processes and analyzes it and formulates our experience. Then, we get a feeling! The word emotion means to *"move"* or *"excite,"* and our

bodies respond accordingly. Grief fills our bodies with feeling: we get tense from guilt or regret, sluggish from sadness, or sometimes explosive frustration from feelings of anger.

Listening to Your Grief

So why is listening to our emotions significant? Our feelings can oftentimes be inconvenient or confusing. They tend to get in the way, so we shut them down to move on with life because if we ignore our feelings, they will go away, right? But our unattended emotions don't go away if we just ignore them. Rather, they get bigger and transmitted in harmful ways. You might find yourself angrier and yelling more than usual. Or maybe you feel a debilitating anxiety when you wake up or go to sleep. Ignoring your feelings only makes them stronger and more defective. Author Mark Brackett puts it this way: *"Hurt feelings don't vanish on their own. They don't heal themselves. If we don't express our emotions, they pile like a debt that will eventually come due."*

Listening to our feelings is the first step in moving through them so they don't cause more damage. This is like attending to the "check engine" light in our cars—we must investigate what the light means so the car doesn't break down. But an important note: *Just because we listen to what our emotions are telling us doesn't mean we have to act on them.* Your sadness might be telling you that your grief is so overwhelming you can't get through it...life feels hopeless! So, you need to stay in bed all day. Information about the feeling of sadness is important to understand about what is happening inside of you, but you don't have to act on it. Just as checking the engine light helps us to know about the car's issue, so too our emotions can help us to know what's going on inside of us. Rather than stuffing your sadness or just reacting to it, listening to what it is telling you can help guide you in how to effectively respond to your feelings of grief. I often offer clients these questions to help them check-in with their feelings:

- What am I feeling or experiencing?
- Can I sit with this feeling for a moment without having to change it, fix it, or get rid of it?
- Can I show myself compassion for this feeling rather than judge myself for having it?
- Considering this, what do I need right now?

Moving Through Grief During the Holidays

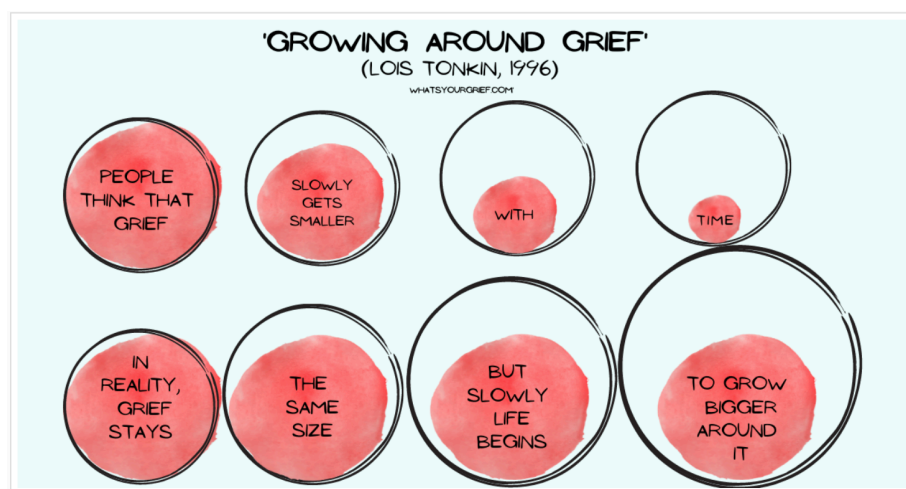
So, as we face the emotions surrounding grief, how do we deal with it during the holidays? I've heard countless people cry in frustration because they don't want to feel sad this time of the year, but they can't stop the tears. But rather than fearing the emotional rollercoaster that our grief can take us on, consider how you can ride the emotional waves of grief instead. Waves come and go; sometimes they feel big like they will overtake us, but they also recede. A surfer doesn't fight a wave that comes their way but moves with it and rides its natural tide, and we can do the same with our emotions. And knowing the waves are temporary may help us not to fear them quite so much. Most emotional waves last about 90 seconds.

As feelings of regret, frustration, or sadness come up, show yourself compassion towards these feelings rather than beating yourself up for them. The holiday season brings our losses into sharper focus than other months—that's okay! We don't feel our grief in August or February like we do in the month of December. Give yourself permission to feel sad. Looking through photos, listening to nostalgic music, or watching a movie you enjoyed with your loved one are all part of the grieving process. Many authors on grief suggest a 10-minute cry—allow yourself 10 minutes of tears, set a timer, and when the time runs out, move on with your day.

We also need to balance these reflections with physical and relational activities. Things like raking leaves, cleaning the house, or physical exercise can be a balm for the grieving heart. Spending time with people who care about us can distract us from grief too. Consider volunteering and serving during the holidays. Serving others reduces our stress and boosts our mood, self-esteem, and joy.

Learning to Live with Grief

Sometimes our hearts don't feel like they can withstand the pain of grief. Loss takes away so much from us, creating a hole in our lives that our hearts must cover over with a hard shell of protection. But our hearts don't have to grow hard in grief. They are more elastic, growing like a balloon and expanding in our suffering rather than shrinking. And once enlarged, our hearts can eventually experience even greater joy, strength, peace, and love. Author Nicholas Wolterstorff put it this way: *"In the valley of suffering, despair and bitterness are brewed. But there also character is made. The valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making."*



As we move through our grief, we don't necessarily get over it, but we learn how to live with the grief instead. However, living with grief seems contradictory to what we hear around us! Friends tell us that we need to move ahead with our lives, and we often hear the constant refrain of getting *"closure"* around grief. But the loss is never going to stop being a loss. Grief never entirely leaves the soul of those who have suffered a severe grief. If anything, the grief keeps going deeper. This may feel hopeless at the beginning. However, the depth of our sorrow is the sign of a healthy soul, not a defective one. Jesus said, *"Blessed are*

those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” Experiencing grief is noble and gracious, not weak and pathetic. However painful, grief is good for the soul and learning to live with grief is a part of our healing journey.

Transformed by Grief

There is no right or wrong in grieving during the holiday season. It’s a season mixed with joy and sorrow, and we have a Savior who knows those experiences well: *“the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross”* (Hebrews 12:2).

So, how are we transformed by our grief? Deep sorrow often has the effect of stripping life of pretense, vanity, and waste. It forces us to ask basic questions about what is most important in our lives bringing a new perspective and light in the darkness. Grief can be wonderfully clarifying as grieving can lead to a simpler life that is less cluttered with nonessentials. Many of us who suffer severe loss become different people: We spend our time differently, making time with family a priority over work; taking time to express more affection and appreciation to loved ones; showing more concern for other grievers and sufferers; and enjoying more of the ordinariness of life. Wolterstorff says of his grief over his son’s death: *“I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that, dry-eyed, I could not see.”*

Our grief can be a gift to us as we take inventory of our lives, reconsider priorities, and determine new directions. Jesus says in Mark 8:36, *“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”* When we suffer grief, it feels like we come to the end of ourselves. But in coming to the end of ourselves, we can also come to the beginning of a vital relationship with God, especially in prayer. Pastor Tim Keller says, *“God is very patient with us when we are desperate. Pour out your soul to him.”* The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that sometimes, when overcome by suffering, we do not know how to pray. But, Paul said, our numbness before God is not indicative of a lack of faith. Instead, it is an invitation for God to draw near and to intercede for us *“through wordless groans,”* like a good mother does when holding a distraught child on her lap. Deep sorrow can make us more alive to present moments with God even when we don’t know what to say.

After all, we are promised that *“those who go forth weeping, bearing their seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves”* (Psalm 126:6). Our grief is never the end of the story. Reach out to us at connect@barnabascenterhou.com if you would like to connect with a counselor this holiday season or in January—it’s a great time to start counseling! The Barnabas Center offers Gospel-centered professional counseling to members at Christ the King and our community, and we count it a privilege to walk with you in whatever season of grief you find yourself. We also regularly host Grief Counseling Support Groups. Please visit www.barnabascenterhou.com for information about The Barnabas Center and upcoming groups.

Book Recommendations:

[Getting Grief Right](#)-O'Malley

[It's Okay That You're Not Okay](#)- Devine

[Lament for a Son](#)-Wolterstorff



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