



# *Dessert First* Holiday Grief Guide



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After my mother died in 2017, loved ones told me that the hardest part of that first year would be the inability to plan for a future without her. The persistent absence of her voice, the loss of her physical presence in a realm where I could see, touch, hug, and hear her was so visceral I felt like I was slowly bleeding to death, hour by hour.

Three months after my mother's August death, November arrived. With it the holiday season hit with full force. My grief train "hit a crossing" and would not budge. The tools that had helped me cope in those few weeks and months somehow left me unprepared for the upcoming Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's holidays.

The proverbial calendar was speeding up; time had marched on, and the last time I'd held Mom's hand was farther and farther away. While the holiday typically heralded a holly-jolly feeling, I knew I'd met a new phase of grief: coping with the holidays without Mom.

No matter your situation—whether you have recently lost a loved one or continue to ride "the grief train"—this Holiday Reader's Guide is meant to be a companion on your journey. We invite you—or your small group, family, community—to honor *your feelings and needs* this holiday season.

### First Steps:

1. Acknowledge your loss and how it may/may not impact your holiday season.
2. Acknowledge that your grief may arrive in "waves" this season—it may come and go, triggered by memories, places, rituals, traditions.
3. Stay in your grief; it's OK to have a blue Christmas.

### Using *Dessert First* as an Individual Reader during the Holidays:

The holidays can be especially hectic. You are invited to embrace quiet time to reflect, remember, journal about your personal grief experience during the holidays. Honor your feelings and needs. Remember that many *Dessert First* chapters may be of use during the holiday season. The following chapters and resources have a particular focus on coping with the death of a loved one and subsequent grief:

Introduction: We're All Terminal

Chapter 6: Let's Talk about Death

Epilogue: Dessert First

Resource 7: Anticipating, Acknowledging, and Grieving Your Loss

Resource 9: Quotes and Scripture Passages about Death and Loss



## Using *Dessert First* in Family or Group Settings during the Holidays:

You may choose and honor your loved one by studying and reading *Dessert First* together during the holiday season. If you determine you'd like to use it as a group, be sure to consider that individuals within the group probably will all have slightly *different* grief experiences this season. Make brave and safe space for everyone's feelings and needs.

## Holiday Reflection and Discussion Questions for Individuals, Families, and/or Groups:

1. What are your happiest holiday memories of your loved one? Feel free to remember silently, journal, write them below, or share the memory aloud with others.
2. What holiday traditions did you share with your loved one? What will you miss most about those traditions, if anything? Be sure to name any pain, sadness, despair, and even frustration that the holidays may trigger with this significant loss.
3. What do you *need* this holiday season? Consider various categories of need: physical, emotional, spiritual, communal, familial, or others. Reflect silently, journal, write below, or share your needs with other.
4. How might you honor your needs? You are invited to consider creative ways, from the practical to the abstract, to honor what you need.
5. What do you anticipate will be *most* difficult about this holiday season? Name any anxiety or fears here. If you have none, consider how this holiday season might trigger difficult feelings for others connected to your deceased loved one.
6. What traditions and rituals would you like to keep this year? What traditions and rituals do you feel you may need to opt out of this year?
7. Are there any new traditions and rituals you'd like to add?
8. Name your intention (purpose) for this holiday season. It can be simple, like "just make it through," or more complex, "ensure that I spend time doing things that are of comfort to me."

## How to Cope This Holiday Season, from "Grief Guru" and Expert J. Dana Trent

### General Tips:

- It's OK to opt out; consider what rituals/traditions you need to opt out of this year (family traditions, parties, card-sending, shopping, etc.). If you are the primary organizer of holiday traditions, ask for help—feel free to delegate—or simply take a year off.
- It's OK to opt in; what *new* rituals/traditions or travel do you need to opt into this year? (New or different traditions, changing the location of holiday gatherings, joining a support group, attending special religious/spiritual services geared toward grief)



### Specific Tips:

- Light a candle in honor of your loved one or set up an LED candle to remain on throughout the season. Allow it to serve as a reminder that your loved one is always present with you in your heart, even when grief feels difficult.
- Cook your loved one's favorite food this holiday season. As you eat and enjoy it—share stories about your loved one.
- Do something special that your loved one enjoyed doing during the holidays. Keep a ritual or tradition that they enjoyed: watch a film, listen to music, visit a special restaurant or destination, attend a service they found meaningful.
- Add your loved one's photo to the holiday card, or place a special photo out where family and guests can see them. This will help others remember that you are grieving a loss and to be gentle.
- If it's useful, ask others for their favorite holiday memories of your loved one.
- If you need a change of scenery, don't hesitate to plan a day or overnight trip to a new holiday destination. Sometimes staying home (with all the memories of holidays past) can be too difficult. Listen to you heart and what you need.

### Summary

Grief is real and can be especially strong during the holidays. Continue to pay attention to your feelings and needs all throughout the season, as they may shift day to day, hour to hour. The important part is that you check in with yourself, practice the best self-care you can, and set clear expectations with others.

*Please note that for orders of 20 books or more, author J. Dana Trent is available for holiday grief Skype Q&As! Learn more about that and bulk orders at [www.chalicepress.com/DessertFirst](http://www.chalicepress.com/DessertFirst).*

*Let Dana know how you and/or your group used Dessert First. Share your individual and group experiences, thoughts, reflections, questions, and comments with her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).*