

GRIEF & THE CHAGIM

Guest article by
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Seven Suggestions on How to Survive Pesach after the Loss of a Spouse

“The chagim are a time spent with loved ones.” To many, none of the other Jewish holidays symbolize this as much as the time before, during, and after the Pesach Seder. Pesach represents the passages of time, milestones, and celebrations not only for our families but for the whole Jewish people. But since Pesach is for celebrating and being with family, how can people be expected to celebrate when their spouse is not there to celebrate with them? For many, this is the hardest part of grieving. The time around the holidays tends to reawaken grief as people are reminded of the extent of their loss and reinforce the reality that their loved one is no longer there to spend it with them.

Here are 7 ideas that can help reduce the stress and ease some of the emotional pain this chag may bring:

① Accept that grieving is a process

Accept that the holiday might be difficult and it's normal to feel down. If it weren't harder, you probably wouldn't be human. Rather than avoiding the feelings of grief, embrace them. Allowing yourself to feel emotions is the best way to move past them. It is not the grief and the accompanying pain you want to avoid, it is the suffering. Remember that grief is the normal way to move past the

pain of your loss but that suffering is optional.

② Start planning early but give yourself options

Grieving people tend to get overwhelmed easily because their emotions are heightened and unpredictable. Therefore, plan ahead and have a few options that allow you to feel comfortable if you start to feel overwhelmed. For example, if you and your spouse usually traveled to attend a large Seder with the extended family, you could call and say, “I am thinking about coming this year but I would like the option to cancel if I feel it's too much for me.” As the holiday gets closer if the thought of travel and a large crowd doesn't feel right your other option may be staying home and attending a small Seder/meal with friends you feel comfortable to be with. Having a plan that includes a few options reduces the pressure on you which increases your ability to cope.

③ Remember your loved one

Do something specific for your spouse. Remember, your relationship with your loved one did not end when he or she died. You will still feel their presence and always be impacted by the life you spent together. Get them a special gift to be used for the holiday, continue to make their favorite Pesach dish, make a donation to an organization in their name, volunteer someplace your spouse would have cared about. Honor your relationship in whatever manner you find comforting because this relationship will never stop being part of you.

4 Take care of yourself physically

Make healthy choices; watch what you eat and drink; get plenty of rest. Remember grieving is exhausting spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Avoid the temptation to drown your grief in excessive alcohol consumption or the use of prescription drugs. There are many ways to distract ourselves from painful feelings but these may only add to your feelings of sadness and minimize your ability to work through your grief. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, try to exercise every day. You can start with just a walk around the block. It may be the last thing you feel like doing but once you get going it gets easier and the benefits are well known. Exercise relieves stress, helps deter depression by increasing endorphins, and improves your self-esteem.

5 Limit social media

It might feel good or even easier at first to check in and talk with all your family and old friends via social media in the comfort of your own home. But remember you have lost one of the people you connected with the most in person. Going out, having a cup of coffee, and being with a friend or family member allows you to connect in a human way through your grieving process. Secondly, judging your life by someone's social media posts is sure way of killing your own joy. Seeing posts of others' simchas over social media that constantly remind you of your loss can continue to open up wounds that may have started to heal.

6 Choose supportive people to be around.

Recognize it's far better to stay home than to be with people who make you feel worse. Be with those people you feel comfortable with, those who are okay with you sharing your loss, those who can sit and chat with you about your spouse. It is important that you can be authentic and do not feel a need to put on show with the people you spend time with. Some people might prefer to share their emotions with others who are experiencing a similar loss. There is a variety of online and in-person support groups for people experiencing grief due to the loss of a spouse.

7 Remember being sad is normal and so is experiencing joy.

Allow yourself to be sad while on the road toward embracing the holiday but try and celebrate the moments of happiness when they come. Savor the smells that come from the kitchen as the holiday meal is being prepared. Notice the smile on a child's face as he or she marvels in the ritual of the Peach Seder. It may be hard work at first but try to embrace joy when it comes because it will come. Finally, and maybe most importantly learn, through your grief, to be real with the people in your life. To live anyway else is way too much work!