

Ask an Expert – Tips to Help Manage “Ambiguous Grief” During the Holidays

Gabriela Murza, Utah State University Extension Health and Wellness Faculty

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Grief is a feeling of deep sorrow that stems from a significant event. It can be the death of a loved one, divorce, job loss, or anything that causes sadness and a lifestyle change. But “ambiguous grief” occurs when caregivers and family members feel loss while someone is still alive, such as when a loved one has dementia or is estranged.

Both types of grief can be made worse during the holidays because of expectations of how things are “supposed” to be, especially since traditions are often tied to this time of year.

To manage ambiguous loss and grief, recognize that things will be different, but trying these strategies can help you navigate the holidays and other difficult times.

If you are celebrating the holidays with someone who has a dementia-related condition:

- Acknowledge that things are not like they used to be. A loved one with dementia may not be able to participate in the holidays as they have in the past. Discuss plans and expectations with family and friends before the holiday. If you have visitors, explain the changes they might see in your loved one.
- Let go of expectations about how the holidays “should” be, and eliminate/modify traditions that no

longer work and create new ones. You may have additional responsibilities that can make juggling your “holiday role” more difficult and stressful.

- Focus on small, shared moments like a smile, a hug, or quiet time together.
- Reduce noise, bright lights, and other distractions. This can help create a sense of peace and reduce feelings of stress for you and your loved one.
- People living with dementia-related conditions may become more agitated and confused in the evenings, a pattern known as sundowning. Because of this, you might consider holding celebrations or meals earlier in the day.
- Use comforting sensory cues, such as familiar music or favorite objects to help your loved one feel peaceful.
- Prioritize self-care. Practice stress-reduction techniques, share your feelings with family and friends, and seek help from professionals or support groups. A professional can help you understand your grief and recommend strategies for management. Be sure the person you choose is on your insurance plan. [PsychologyToday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com) lists psychologists in your zip code area. Cross-reference them to the providers listed on your insurance plan.

If you are celebrating the holidays while someone is estranged:

- Understand that reconciliation may not happen right away. You can try if you feel it's safe to do so, but don't force a connection.
- Make a plan for how much contact you want to have with the person, which events to attend or invite them to, and which topics you want to avoid. This can help alleviate stress and show respect for everyone's feelings.
- Practice small acts like lighting a candle, writing a letter you don't send, and having a moment of silence to honor the relationship and acknowledge the loss or change.

For more tips and information, see the video “[Managing Grief During the Holidays.](#)”

Contact

Gabriela Murza
Gabriela.Murza@usu.edu

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