

Creating New Holiday Traditions

There are plenty of ways to cope with the holiday season, including skipping them altogether. That's not an uncommon way of dealing -- or not dealing -- with the holidays for grieving families, especially the first holiday season after a loss.

Another way, however, is to start some new holiday traditions. This may be the best option for you if you have other children, or family who are depending on you to keep up with the usual presents, tree-decorating, or candle-lighting.

How Do I Start a "New" Tradition?

Traditions can start intentionally or by accident, but it only takes a few times before it seems like it's always been a part of your life. If you do want to start something new, it's best to let everyone who will be involved know early, especially if your new ideas mean foregoing old traditions.

Be honest and upfront. Express your feelings, either in person, or in a note if you have trouble talking about your feelings. Explain that you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings and you hope they'll support your new idea. Tell them having your loved ones around you during this time would be very appreciated.

It's also important to give yourself permission to celebrate, even in the midst of sadness. One of the hardest steps in grief work is realizing you will experience moments of joy and happiness, and that doesn't mean you no longer care about your loss, or that you've "moved on." It's not disrespectful to your baby if you find a way to enjoy the holidays. In fact, it's an important part of incorporating the memory of your child into your new reality.

What Are Some Ideas for New Traditions?

Anything that feels right to you and helps you honor the memory of your baby can be a tradition. It's OK to try something one year, and something else another year. Your needs as a grieving parent can change over time, and you may find yourself wanting something different from year to year. Here is a list of ideas to get you started:

• Ornaments

Have an ornament engraved with your baby's name. You can get a new one each year, if you'd like, to give you something to look forward to when you put your tree. If you have a photograph of your baby that you like, have it resized to fit in one of the many frame-style ornaments available now. Seeing your child on your Christmas tree can help to make your baby a part of the family gathering.

• Dedicate a tree specifically to your baby

Have friends and family bring special ornaments to decorate the tree. Pick a theme if you like -- angels, children's toys, or some other theme special to you. You can make decorating the tree an event, bringing together loved ones for the holidays and to remember your baby.

• Get crafty

If you or someone in your life is handy with a sewing machine, you can have a baby blanket or special article of clothing made into a tree skirt, soft ornament, or even the clothing for an angel at the top of your tree.

- **Hang a stocking for your child**

Write a letter or note to your baby, expressing your love for him or her and tuck it into the stocking. Ask other members of your family to do the same, filling up your child's stocking with memories and thoughts of love. You can read the notes, or save them from year-to-year, or if you have young children, remove them on Christmas Eve and tell them Santa (or Jesus) delivered them for you.

- **Perform random acts of kindness**

Ask your friends and family to perform random acts of kindness in your baby's memory, and have them send you a note describing what they've done. Tuck each note into your baby's stocking and read them aloud on Christmas to see how much good was done in your baby's honor.

- **Give your baby a special signature**

If you send holiday cards, it can be difficult to have your baby's name missing from the signatures. Feel free to sign your baby's name with a special designation, like a rubber stamp of an angel, or a small cross.

- **Share how you're feeling**

If you send a year-end letter with your holiday cards, be sure to include a bit about how you're coping. It's okay to be honest -- tell people if you're still struggling, and if it helps you to hear your baby's name, tell them to feel free to talk to you about him or her. If you're hosting a gathering, display photographs or a scrapbook about your baby so everyone knows you're OK with talking about him or her.

- **Light a candle**

Whether you keep the candle lit through the season, or just during a family gathering, the flame will be a reminder of the person missing from the festivities.

- **Buy a toy for a needy child**

Many charitable organizations have the names and ages of children available at the holidays. Try looking for a child who is the same age your baby would be. It will give you a chance to buy the kind of presents you might have chosen for your own baby. Feel free to include a note that your gift is given in memory of your child.