

# **Handling the Holidays**

## **WHEN A LOVED ONE HAS DIED**

An Activity Book for Kids and Those Who Care for Them

**Robyn J. Plocher, M.Div.**

Handling the Holidays When a Loved One Has Died:  
An Activity Book for Kids and Those Who Care for Them

By Robyn J. Plocher, M. Div.

Used with permission

©Robyn Plocher 2009, all rights reserved

*With appreciation to the children and volunteers  
of  
Rick's House of Hope*

Some activities in this book are adapted from the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children, [www.starrtraining.org/tlc](http://www.starrtraining.org/tlc)

## *A Note to Parents & Caregivers*

Adults often think of children as being “resilient” or “too young to understand death and grief.” The truth is, some children are resilient, just as some adults are. Yet all children are vulnerable to feelings of sadness, depression, anger, fear and anxiety when someone they love dies. Any child old enough to laugh and experience pleasure is also old enough to experience the pain of grief. While children may not understand death in the same way as adults, they feel the same feelings of grief when a loved one dies.

It is most frightening for children to have the truth withheld from them when they intuitively know something is wrong or something has changed in their homes. At the time of a death in the family, parents and/or other caregivers may speak to children truthfully using language appropriate for their age and development to tell them that a loved one has died. It is appropriate for parents to share their beliefs about what happens to someone when they die. It is also wise to acknowledge different feelings people have at the time of a death. For example, feelings of sadness because we miss them and feelings of happiness and joy when we remember special times we have shared. It is best to avoid euphemisms, such as telling the child their loved one is sleeping. Young children are very literal and concrete thinkers. They may come to associate sleep with the ultimate separation of death and become fearful of going to sleep. Or, they may be confused as to why their loved one won’t wake up and play with them.

When someone we love dies, the holidays can be overwhelming for adults. Adults may choose to seek comfort in rituals and traditions of the past. Or, they may limit their holiday celebration, setting aside family traditions for a year or two. This book was created to help children in your family connect with positive memories of past holidays, including memories of the loved one who died. It will help them express their needs and desires related to this holiday.

This book was also designed as a tool to encourage communication between you, the caregiver, and the children you care for. You are encouraged to sit with your child as they complete the workbook. Ask a few questions about what they have drawn or written. Gently draw them out. Acknowledge the feelings they express without judgment. If you can, affirm that you have had similar feelings and what helped you with your grief.

If you have any questions or concerns about your child’s needs during this holiday season, or any other time, please contact me at [rjplocher@gmail.com](mailto:rjplocher@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

*Robyn J. Plocher*

## *A Note to Children Using This Workbook*

Kids, when I was about your age my grandpa died. I didn't really know how I felt at the time. One day, I heard my cousin say, "It just won't be Christmas without Grandpa." I started thinking about how our family always got together with Grandma and Grandpa on Christmas day. Many good memories came back to me. Suddenly, I also realized that Christmas would never be the same because Grandpa would no longer be there.

If you have experienced the death of a family member or friend, this workbook will help you remember some of the good times. It will also help you to prepare for the holiday your family observes. Making holiday plans when your loved one has died is not easy. Complete these activities with your parent or caregiver. It is important for them to know how you feel.

Don't forget to look at the last page. This is a list of projects and activities your family might be interested in.

Grace and Peace,

*Robyn J. Plocher*

This is a picture of me having fun with \_\_\_\_\_.  
(person who died)

This is my family celebrating Thanksgiving.

The best part of Thanksgiving is \_\_\_\_\_

**This is my family celebrating** \_\_\_\_\_  
(Christmas, Hanukah or other holiday)

**My favorite holiday memory is**

---

---

A sad thing happened this year in your family. Someone you loved has died. Holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas feel different when someone we love has died. We miss that person. Our happy feelings of celebration and our sad feelings of missing them get all mixed up inside us. Our parents and other family members may be feeling these same mixed up feelings inside, also.

On this page you may draw or write your biggest worry about the holidays this year.

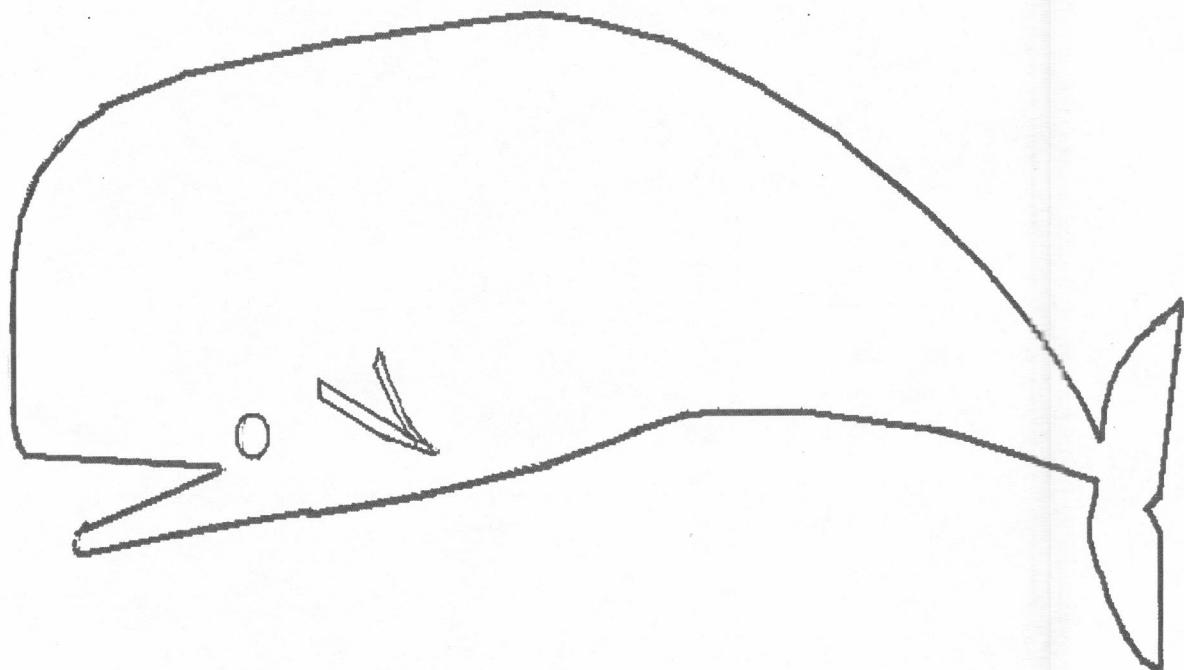
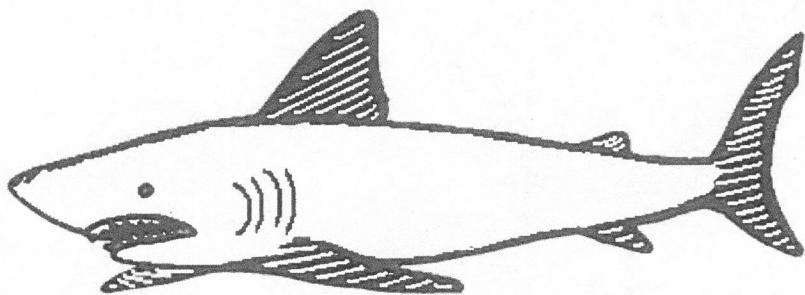
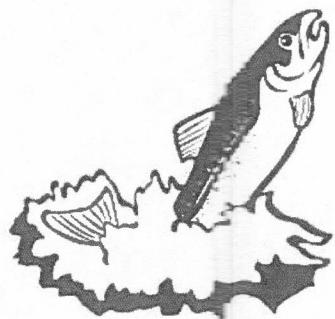
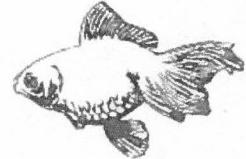
This is my biggest worry about the holidays:

---

---

This is how big my worry is:

Color the fish that shows how big your worry is.



Directions: Color in the letters of the word below in your favorite holiday colors.

# TRADITION

**Tradition** is a big word that means something we do the same way and at the same time. Holidays are a special time when people think about traditions. One family may have the tradition of opening gifts on Christmas morning. Another may have the tradition of opening gifts on Christmas Eve.

One family may always have Grandma's pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving because that is their tradition. Another family may always have Aunt Mary's cranberry-pecan pie at Christmas because that is their tradition. Still another family may light a menorah at Hanukkah because that is their tradition.

Think about the traditions that are most important in your family. Then, on the next page, draw a picture to show your family what traditions you would like to keep this year.

**GO TO THE NEXT PAGE**

## My Favorite Tradition

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

(parent, guardian or whoever you celebrate the holidays with)

This is a picture of something special we do during the holidays. I like it a lot, and hope we will do it this year, too.

Love,

\_\_\_\_\_

(Your name)

Now that you have completed the pages of this book, be sure to share your pictures with your parent, guardian or another family member you see during the holidays. Tell them about the pictures you have drawn. Let them know what you are thinking and feeling about the holidays this year. Tell them any worries you may have.

On this page you can draw a picture of the person, or people, you want to share this book with.

## Family Projects and Activities

### Candles

Purchase a large pillar candle in a holiday color. Buy an assortment of holiday decorative items that can be used to decorate the candle. Items might include greenery and bows, gold or green ribbon, stickers, sequence, small wooden ornaments, etc. All of these may typically be found and purchased from a hobby store. The family will work together to decorate a holiday memory candle. A good way to attach sequence to the candle is with small straight pins. Wooden ornaments and ribbon may be attached with glue guns or hot wax. Of course, adults must supervise this. For an added personal touch, attach a photo of your loved one to the candle. Adults should always supervise the burning of candles. This was a favorite activity of the families at Rick's House of Hope. Some families have shared that they burn their candle ever night at dinner between Thanksgiving and Christmas..

### Picture Frame Ornaments

Create a square frame with large craft sticks glued together. Then decorate craft sticks with glitter, glitter glue, stickers, poms and other items. Glue a cardboard or paper backing to the frame and attach a picture of the loved one who has died. For an added touch, turn the frame into a tree ornament by making a hanger out of pipe stem cleaner. Now you have a meaningful, home-made ornament that can hang on the tree for many years.

### “Stained Glass” Candleholder\*

Before starting, collect one clean glass jar (salsa or mayonnaise work well.) Tear or cut small pieces of various colored tissue paper to cover the jar. Use several colors for a mosaic effect. Or use two shades of one color. For a different effect, add white tissue pieces to your two tone design.

Then, using a foam craft brush, spread Mod Podge craft glue over a section of the outside of your jar. Paste pieces of tissue quickly because Mod Podge dries fast. Do not worry about being neat. Partially overlapping colors can create a pleasing effect.

Turn the jar and repeat the process above until the whole jar is covered with tissue. At this point you could add such items as trees, hearts, stars and more on top of the tissue. I like to add a final coat of Hodge Podge over the top of the tissue, being very careful not to tear the tissue. Let your jar dry for at least one hour (overnight is best.) When dry, you may want to tie a bow to the rim of the jar. This makes a lovely “stained glass” candle holder for your holiday. The candle you burn can symbolically represent the presence of your loved one.

### **Other Ideas**

Take a plate of cookies to the staff at a nursing home or hospital to let them know they are appreciated.

Together, shop for and donate items for a “mittens tree” or similar project in your community or place of worship.

Join a group going Christmas caroling.

What family projects or activities have you found meaningful? Go to our Facebook page to share your ideas with others.

\*Authors favorite!