

RUNWAY FOR RECOVERY

A Nineteen-Years-Later Holiday Reflection, by Olivia M. Achtmeyer Boger

I remember the first few Christmases without Mom. I tried so hard to replicate everything. I was twenty going on forty-five, and I was convinced that with enough shortbread, enough time to decorate, and enough crazy running around, I could replicate the Christmas magic that she created for me and my three siblings. We were still living in her home, and I remember walking into the basement and feeling a combination of being overwhelmed and being so sad when I would see the dozen Christmas boxes of decorations. Of course I had moments of comfort when it would all come together, but it was never really the same.

The problem was that I was chasing an unattainable goal. Even if I had figured out a way to hot-glue-gun-glitter-perfectly onto round ornaments to create personalized gifts, it wouldn't have allowed my mother to walk back into the room and fill it with her love. I think that I was decorating and trying to replicate because I truly believed that for a short moment, we would feel like she was back. I longed for my mother to still be here, to be present. I did not want to let go and deal with my reality. The pain of loss and love was too powerful.

Then I was afraid that she'd be upset if we didn't try to set it all up in the same way.

That was nineteen years ago, and it has taken me a while to adjust my thinking. I have now learned that I have to focus on the things I love about the holidays, I am good at doing, and traditions that mean something to me and my family. In coming up with my own traditions, I carry on her tradition of filling my heart and home with memories, activities and celebration that mirrors the joy she carried around with her. The deeper connection to my mother on Christmas came years ago when I let go of her way of doing things and embraced my own. Ultimately, I decided that I was keeping her spirit alive through my own actions. And now, the simple act of hanging one of her ornaments and cooking one of her recipes allows me to touch and smell the things of my childhood, which in turn, always makes her come more alive again.

Everyone has to "get to the realization" on their own and in their own time, and I am sure, that part of my process included running around trying to replicate it all and realizing how truly exceptional she was to be able to do it all and make it look so easy. So give yourself a break wherever you are in your discovery and process. If you try and fail, your person is somewhere smiling at your efforts. Certainly, you know in your heart that they wouldn't want you to be in more pain because you trying to keep it all the same but missing a major piece of the season.

In my mind, I keep my mom alive by talking about her and reflecting on the memories I had within my own heart and with others. And it is because of this time of year that I am able to feel even more connected with her now--so connected in fact, that I had to go back and add my middle initial M. to my name up top -- it is for MacMillen, we maiden name and the fact that she placed it in all of our names at birth to make sure that she lived on.





Getting Ready for the Holidays

There is no magic or recipe to glide thru the holidays, yet there are some simple, easy, and practical ways to cope with this time of year.

Current Mood.

Are you missing a loved one or starting a new chapter without a loved one? We've been there as well, and every year, it helps to have a reset moment where you recognize the elephant in the room and you remind yourself of some ways to ease the impact of the loss.



Simple Suggestions.

- Lower your expectations; nothing is perfect.
- Try something new, do something different, and switch it up.
- Find a simple and repeatable way to honor your loved one:
 - Baking their favorite recipe and sharing it with family or friends.
 - Wearing your person's favorite piece of clothing or jewelry.
 - Reading the same letter/email/text/journal from the person in a favorite spot every year.



Daily Ideas.

- Upon waking, take a few minutes to breathe, stretch and move.
- Maintain a calm presence.
- Read your favorite mediation book or try a free app like Stop, Breathe & Think, Headspace or Calm.
- Practice prayer, meditation and mindfulness.
- Take a 10-minute walk to ease the stress and tension we store in our bodies.
- Connect with others--a friend who is kind, supportive and feeds your spirit.
- Think of 5 reasons to be grateful for today.
- Practice good sleep hygiene -- cool, dark, and screen-free room.
- Same time getting into bed and rising so that your body finds the routine.



Activity Ideas.

- Make new holiday traditions such as going to a restaurant or having a buffet/potluck instead of a formal dinner
- Watch a favorite tv show or movie that will make you smile and laugh.
- Take a bubble bath and play your favorite soothing music.
- Eat nutritious and healthy foods.
- Write in your journal
- Increase visits to your therapist if you feel the need



Social Strategy.

- Limit the number of family events and/or parties if you feel drained and just too overwhelming.
- If you are feeling lost, book the calendar with events to look forward to well ahead of time and ask a friend to make sure that you keep to your plan.
- Self care is very important, and people are different. An extrovert thrives off of connection while an introvert can gain energy from time alone. Don't follow someone else's playbook, stay true to yourself.
- Remember to smile, think positive thoughts about yourself, and talk with others about your goals for the year so that you start to hear yourself making plans aloud.



Give Back to Others.

- Volunteer at the local food pantry or homeless shelter serving meals.
- Shovel someone's sidewalk/driveway.
- Drop-off wrapped, new toys at a local holiday drive.
- Grab a bag of unused hats, scarves, and mittens and give them to a shelter.
- Make a donation online to a cause that inspires you and write the organization a note in support of them.



Remember to place the oxygen mask on yourself first before helping your children, family or others in you who may need assistance!

Suggestions compiled from licensed R4R social worker, Karen Budnick, LCISW

