

8 Ways to Help our Grieving Friends during the Holidays

By The Rev. Carrie Schofield-Broadbent



Photo Credit 1 Carrie Schofield-Broadbent. Sunset at through a memorial bench. Butterfly Garden of Hope, Syracuse NY

I think of grief as a room inside myself. At first the room was gigantic, unfamiliar, and completely foreign. I felt unprepared to dwell in it. It took up my whole being, which was scary at first. One thing that helped me through that time, that helped me make a home for my sorrow in that room of grief, was the small kindnesses shared by those around me. I knew that there was nothing they could say or do to take away my grief. But simple acts of compassion and thoughtfulness helped me to see that this broken world and my tender heart could hold, at the same time, both sorrow and gratitude, despair and hopefulness.

1. **Send a Christmas Card**—Christmas card-giving doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing game. I stopped sending them to everyone on the list years ago when I

*“You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. **And** you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.”*

— Anne Lamott

could share what I wanted on social media for free and save a bunch on postage.

What if we kept the Christmas card tradition alive by sending a Christmas card each year to everyone we know who's grieving a loss? It feels great to receive a card, to be remembered, to have something pretty to hang up where we can see it. We can include in these cards a message of sympathy, even if it's been months since our friends lost their loved ones.

Even a little message like, "I know it seems like everything out there is all *Deck the Halls, All is Calm All is Bright, and Reindeer Games*, but I know this season is hard for you and I'm holding you and your family close to my heart." It helps to name the grief. (Here is a website with absolutely brilliant [empathy cards](#).)

2. **Change a holiday tradition of your own**—Not only are some of our friends grieving the loss of a person, they are also grieving the loss of everything that went with that person, including holiday traditions.

One way to support our grieving friends is to invite them to share the holidays with us. And while bringing someone new into our already well-established holiday rituals may be a beautiful experience for them, it may also increase their sense of loneliness and detachment.

Why not start a new tradition together? Maybe we ALWAYS have Christmas Eve brunch at our house. But in solidarity with our grieving friends, we can all go out for brunch together instead—or choose a tree; see a holiday play together; bake Christmas cookies at *their* house...

Consider changing a few holiday traditions with your grieving friend, so you're all doing something new together.



Photo Credit 2 Carrie Schofield-Broadbent. Dragonfly Ornaments 2018

3. **Give them an ornament**—When we experienced a deep loss in our family, I bought a little ornament to hang on the tree each year. Now we have a beautiful, physical reminder of our loved one, even

though he was not going to be part of our Christmases in the ways we had hoped.

This year I decided to give a special ornament to all those who are close to me who've lost someone they love in this past year.

4. **Donate to a charity**—For those with the financial ability, making a donation to a special charity in honor of someone you've lost is a beautiful gift.

Not only does charitable giving provide spiritual gifts for the giver, it also honors a loved one and their family, and helps a good cause.

Think deeply about what mattered to the person during their whole life, not just their cause of death. Did they love feeding people? Find a feeding program local to them to support. Did they love to read? A gift to their local public library. Were they enriched by the love of animals? There are many animal shelters and agencies to give to. Were they a veteran? Educator? Artist? Involved in a faith community? Cared for the environment? You get the picture...

Send a note to your friend who is grieving to let them know about your gift. It will be a blessing to know that their loved one's memory is still blessing the world.

5. **Invite them out**—Invite your grieving friends out of the house.

In the throes of grief, when we're missing our loved ones, nowhere seems like the right place to be, so many just opt to stay at home. Invite your friends out. Go for a walk, go see some art, check out a new café, volunteer together. Going out in December doesn't have to involve shopping or crowds.

6. **Help them decorate**—One of the most lovely and unexpected ways in which we were cared for in our grief, was when a friend's mother sent us a beautiful Christmas wreath for our door, all the way from Atlanta, Georgia to Syracuse, New York. There was a simple note that said something like, "you may not feel much like decorating, so I thought I'd send you something pretty."

Every time I looked at that wreath, I knew that we were loved and supported by people both near and far, both well-known and more distant. And it made me feel like I had my act together a little tiny bit, which was a great blessing.

A friend I know who's grieving quite intensely this year after losing her husband ended up having a tree-decorating party with her friends. While it was heartbreaking to do that without her husband there, good friends helped her bear the sadness.

The Two Greatest Gifts:

7. **Listen and be present**—Be with your friend, even when you feel like you don't know what to say. Offer to be with your friend, even when you do not know if the timing is right.

Don't wait for it to feel comfortable to sit with someone in their grief—just do it.

One of the best gifts you can give is to be present for whatever your friend needs and to listen to whatever they need to say. Follow their lead.

Sometimes I say something like, "Let's go out. We can talk about your grief, or we can talk about anything but your grief and pretend it's not even there. Just let me know."

8. **Share your memories**—So many of us, fearing we'll say the "wrong thing", clam up in the face of grief. Be that friend who doesn't do that.

Speak the person's name who you're grieving. Share the stories.

Don't worry about bringing up something painful for your friend. Most of the time, they long for the stories; they thirst for them like water on a hot day. Tell the funny stories, the poignant stories, and even the little

"There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve -- even in pain -- the authentic relationship. Further more, the more beautiful and full the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer

memories that seem like “no big deal.” When our loved ones are gone and there’s no time left to make new memories, these stories become even more precious.



Photo Credit 3 Carrie Schofield-Broadbent. Special Dragonfly on our family Christmas tree ⁱ

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dedicated supporters of public education. Carrie finds joy in working with congregations to find health and vitality, preaching, talking with people of all beliefs about life’s deep questions. She sees her ministry in the world as one of encouragement, hospitality, and reconciliation. She is an undistinguished yet enthusiastic practitioner of: pottery (wheel), painting, music, hiking, reading, and quilting.

ⁱ Why Dragonflies? When my family was grieving, a friend gave us [this book](#), which tells the story of waterbugs and dragonflies, which became for us a very hope-filled and helpful metaphor. [Here’s a pdf of the story](#).