

5 Tips for Self-Care in the Holidays



Benjamin Scott Allen

Be Aware That Holidays Magnify EVERYTHING.

What we carry from the moment of loss into every moment since takes on greater intensity around birthdays, anniversaries, special occasions and holidays. Feeling the loss of the ones you will always love is daily, but special days magnify all the emotions, the memories, the missing... and the love.

The sea change of every day can easily turn into a tsunami in the holidays because what perpetually lies beneath the surface has greater potential to rise beyond a normal moment into a torrent of feelings.

This is normal.

It is a normal response to an abnormal situation. It is not normal to sit at a table with others without the one you love who once sat next to you. It is not normal to feel the winter wind alone. It is not normal to turn to speak to the one you love and find your words frozen in the realization that they are no longer present.

And it is not normal to live in a world that pretends life goes on when so much of your world has paused, suspended in space.

There will be those that want the holiday season to be as it was. And that is normal. But for those in loss, those who now sit in a holiday season of Before but now live in the world of the Afterloss, what was, is no more.

This is where the magnification of everything rises from its invisible slumber. It is the stretching and twisting of the two worlds – the world of Before and the world of the Afterloss. What was collides with what is like tectonic plates pressing against each other beneath the sea. The present looks similar to the past, but loss has changed everything, and everything swells within the sorrow embedded in the simplest of tasks or the most ordinary of moments.

Be gentle. Be care-full.

Self-care in the season of sorrow's magnification can take many forms. There are ways to take care of yourself that really are avenues of self-nurture throughout every day, but on special days it entails special care, greater awareness, and a greater gentleness.

Here are a few tips to self-care.



1. Be Real and Be Yourself

The world has changed, and so have we. When each of my children and my wife died, I believe a part of me went with them and a part of each one of them became an integral part of me. A major component of grief work is the reintegration of my new relationship with the ones I love, the world around me, and the world within me.

The first season of loss was an intense touchstone of all three of those dynamics of reintegration. Even today, the reintegration process continues, but it is not as intense as the first season of loss. As mentioned before, the magnification of all those elements is huge.

For the sake of this conversation, let's address just one of the dynamics – the world within. Who we are now is in a perpetual state of change. In my experience, the part of me that went with the one I love had left an enormous void. I was keenly aware that the emptiness I felt was the part of me that went missing.

For instance, what Lydia, my first wife, left me was not just the shared history and beautiful memories, but it was more than that. She left me her love. A love that became interwoven with my love...and within love itself. She left me her wisdom, her strength, her eye for beauty and her compassion for the world around her. To this day, my wisdom, strength, beauty and compassion carries her signature as well as Matt's and Bryan's, my two children who have also died.

Living in loss contracted me, expanded me, and has shaped a new me. When I suggest you be yourself, please realize that the unfolding of what is gone and what is left is in a perpetual reshaping process. We change just as seasons change. Who we are is not who we were, or who we will become.

In the holiday season, I encourage you to live in the who you are right now. And understand that it is not just the ground beneath you that is changing, it is the ground within you that is in flux as well. Loss and love are so intertwined. It is a part of grief work to find the harmony between loss and love's reshaping of who we are through the reintegration experience.

So, be who you are right now and be real. If it hurts real bad, hurt. If something is real funny, laugh. If a moment brings up real pain, feel it. If you find real joy, enjoy it. When we are real and accept who we are right now, we have a real good chance to lean into our sorrow and loss and find within very lost moment there is a timeless embrace of love and potential healing.



Reflection

What situations/events do anticipate being challenging for this holiday season?

Who around you can you be honest and open with that can support you through this time?

What do you believe would be helpful to share with them and what support can you ask them for over the holidays?

2. Balance What Was with What Is – The Majesty of Memory

Memory lies at the intersection of what was and what is. The majestic nature of memory can blend the two in an intimate dance of loving reflection and presence.

There are those who are not travelers in the Afterloss, those that have not experienced great loss, who will want you to “forget about it, go on and get on.” But loss itself warps time and going on is an illusion and memory does not forget. Loss in the holidays bends moments into the direction of the heart. And the heart holds dear the love that can no longer be held.

Feel free to be free. Go where the heart goes. Let the memory inhale the tenderness of what was and exhale into the moment that is.

Out of the blue I would be stopped by a memory. A word said by another, a thought rising from the recesses of my mind, a location where once I had more than their spirit, but their bodies too. It was in those painfully precious moments where tears would come. Longing would lift me into the



realms of the Afterloss where only the heart can go. It was in this suspended animation of great sorrow that great love would descend. I would follow the emptiness of my hurt into the layers of remembrance and emerge in the fullness of love's tender longing, a longing that matched mine.

The majesty of memory drew me into the majestic landscape of the Afterloss. It was there. It is there where memory that once hurt heals. Lean into the memory and follow it as it guides into the sacred places of the expanse.

I truly believe my relationship with those I will always love will always continue. To remember is one of my avenues of connection. I do not wallow in the past. I let the past be one of the majestic colors I use to paint the masterpiece of the present. Being able to live in the present tense is the art of blending all the colors of life's palette, be they colors of sorrow or solace, past or present, endings and beginnings. For what ended with their deaths began a new relationship with their lives, my life and life itself.

Reflection

List some of the memories you have that are strongest for you right now?

What are some of the things you are most grateful for in the memories you just listed?

Are there some special mementos or places that bring you closer to your loved one that would be helpful to embrace right now?



3. Finding Safe Places/Public and Private Time

Holidays magnify the need for safe times and safe places. Holidays highlight the reality that not everyone is in the same place and feeling the same things. Many of those living in sorrow are silently asked to suspend the “depression” and masquerade in the joviality of the season. Being sad is a downer to the rest; and quite often, we don't want to burden others with our sorrow. So, we hold it in, hide it away, and consequently our tears flow down the inside of us rather than let others see the flow of sorrow down our cheeks.

We do this for them. And we do this for us. For sorrow needs safety. It is important to have a plan to find times and places where the tears can flow freely. Many a time I have stepped away for a walk or a quiet place, not to gather myself, but to release my self.

Everyone needs time to release, let go into the sorrow and let the sorrow find shape in solace. In a time of collective joy I needed time for private pain. When I carved out moments of release where I didn't feel the need to hide or suspend my sorrow, I was able to return to festivities with a genuine joy in having those I still had in the flesh close to me.

The Afterloss is a parallel universe. The world of Before goes on. The world of the Afterloss goes in. I do not expect others to have my experience any more than I would expect me to have theirs. The holidays bring people together, but the worlds we live in may be light years in distance. When I accept that my path is not theirs and their path is not mine, I am able to find a common path. It is on that path we meet, we spend the holiday hours in communion, then we depart into the worlds in which we have come, and in which we must go.

Reflection

What works best for you – spending more time with safe people that can support you or having time alone? Make a plan that reflects what you feel you will need to help nurture and nourish you during the holiday season.

What are some of the ways can you prepare those around you for what you are feeling and will need during the holidays?



How can you best stay in touch with what you need and how you can give that to yourself?

Make a list of safe people you can call on if you need support.

4. Create a Time for Honoring Loved Ones

There are family traditions that seem to coalesce around the holidays. Traditions originate out of a desire to collectively gather. Traditions are another place where the past finds presence in the present.

When we live in loss, everything changes. Gatherings are altered. Traditions shift for us. Singing songs together has one less voice. And the hollow emptiness of the missing sound echoes in the song itself.

There is no getting around the massive loss of the missing one that magnifies loss itself in the holidays. What's not there is even more there in the emptiness that permeates the season. In every sound of laughter, in every silent tear, in every word spoken the unspoken speaks of loss to the one hurting, healing and doing the best they can in the living with what's left.

So, how do we bring the sorrow that submerges us out into the world around us?

We can create new traditions, new rituals. We gather with those that wish to, or we gather alone in an expression of love for the ones we will always love. It could be a lighting of a candle, a wish upon a star, a walk on a path we once walked with them. It could be a sharing of stories by the ones gathered about the one we gather without.

But if you must create a ritual or newly formed tradition alone, if the ones you are with do not share the same desire to create such a moment, then gather alone. For in reality, we are never alone. There is not one breath we take that lives in isolation. Gather within presence and Presence will gather with you.



I have my own traditions and rituals. One of mine is the Rose Ceremony.



When anniversaries come around that draw me into a need to express outwardly what I feel perpetually, I take a rose to a body of water. I go to water because it was in the Pacific Ocean that I spread the ashes of Lydia, Matt and Bryan. Water, whether it is a river, a lake or a pond, is a place of remembrance for me.

I take a single rose, think of a specific experience we shared, thank them for such a gift, and then, I kiss the petal and release it into the water. Petal after petal, memory after memory, thankfulness after thankfulness, I kiss and release.



It is an outward expression of my deepest gratitude that I was honored to share even the briefest of moments in the timelessness of love with them. The touch of the soft petal against my lips has become the kiss of Bryan, my infant child's skin. The petal's feathered texture press against my lips just as my lips once touched the smooth strands of Matt's hair for a goodnight kiss. Lydia's lips linger in my petal's kiss and the wind that rides between the rose and the kiss becomes her breath that one breathed into me.

With every kiss there is a deep and abiding thank you, not just for the memory, but also for the shape of my heart as it beats today. I would never know the infinite expanse of love without them. At least one kiss of a petal is for what they left with me and the part of me that got to go with them.

I encourage you to find an outward expression for your love. Love is never lost. It just changes form. Form a new way to love in the midst of loss. Find your own external expression of honor, remembrance and love that conveys the gift of life the one you love has given you.

Reflection

What experiences and/or qualities in your loved one do you most remember and want to honor?

How would you like to honor the memory of your loved one during this holiday season?

Who would you like to include in this time of honoring?



5. Keep On Keeping On

People around us who are not living in the strange new world of the Afterloss can have the mentality that we should let go and move on. They mean well. They don't want to see us hurt and many want life to go back to the way it was. But life doesn't go back. It goes forward. And the hurt of loss doesn't go away, it goes different.

Just as life evolves, loss evolves. I have found that loss has reshaped everything in my world. And it continues to reshape me as life goes on. And life does go on.

When Lydia was close to death we spent hours upon hours talking about what was going to happen to her and what was going to happen to me. One of the things she said was that the greatest testament to our relationship would be for me to find someone else to love. She said what that would say is that our relationship was beautiful enough to want to have again.

I have been with Rachel for over fourteen years. She is a remarkable woman. She knows that our love is both/and, not either/or. My love for Rachel finds its roots in the love of Lydia, and in love itself.

When I let in life, life draws me into itself. And the fluidity of life moves me into new challenges, new vistas, new love that is grounded in every experience I've collected into this moment.

Life did not stop when Lydia died. Love did not end when Bryan died, or years later when Matt died. Yes, life and love forever changed, but it did not end.

When I celebrate life now with Rachel I am in celebration of all of life. Loss does not live in isolation. Loss touches everything that touches me. Love does not live in isolation. Love touches everything that touches me. I live a both/and life. I do not need to let go of one to love another. I am not betraying my life with Lydia by the joy I have with Rachel. I am honoring the testament of my life and love with Lydia every moment I live life to the fullest and love in the deepest way possible.

To go on doesn't mean you have to go without the ones you love. And it's okay to go on. For me, to go on means I get to go on with them. They are a part of me and I want to live all of me.



Reflection

What can you celebrate in your life today?

What are some of the things you want to do in this coming year?

What are some ways you can continue in the unfolding of your self-care in the holiday season and beyond?

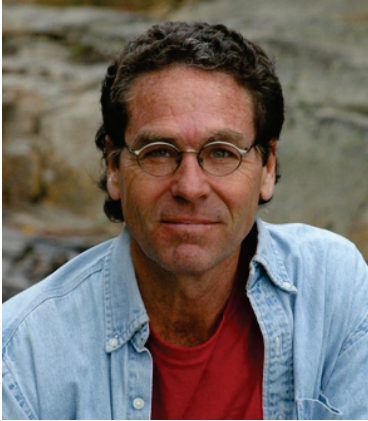
In Conclusion

The holidays are an intense time, but when the days are done, day continues. Night comes. Night goes. And for those living in loss, we return to the task of living on. Everything I've just suggested can be used daily, and I do. But in the holiday time, I encourage you to pay special attention to self-care. Be gentle.

Loss hurts. Healing is not the absence of loss or pain. Healing is the ability to be at peace in the pain. When I embrace the hurt I find that somewhere within the pain there is a pathway to healing.

My hope for you is that something here has been helpful to you. We do not wander the Afterloss alone. We, too, gather in seasons. The seasons of loss follow a different calendar. Sometimes winter stays longer. But none of us rides the seasons alone. There are others who know loss. You will find us on the many pathways of the Afterloss. Wherever you are, we are there, too. Even if you can't see us, look deep within and you will know you are not alone. May your Holidays be filled with healing, with peace, with joy and above all, with love.





Benjamin Scott Allen, author, speaker, coach

Several years ago Benjamin appeared extensively in the media beginning with the *New York Times*, *Dateline*, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *20/20* and various local newspapers, especially *The Dallas Morning News*. His story also featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The subject matter focused on the tragic circumstances his family endured.

Lydia, his wife, received a blood transfusion with HIV during the birth of their first child, Matt. He and Lydia had another child, Bryan, before they were informed of her infection. Consequently, his wife and their two children died, the first being in 1985 and the last death was in 1995.

In the midst of all this, one TV producer approached him to secure the rights to make a film about his life. He declined. Many people asked him to write his story, knowing how much it could potentially help others. He was not ready.

Finally, after many years of emotional and spiritual exploration, he came to a place of peace. His book, *Out of The Ashes: Healing in the Afterloss*, details that journey. Portraying normal people in abnormal circumstances, the book shows how he, and those he loved and lost, came to a deeper connection with life in the embrace of death.

It is an examination of what loss can take, but what it can also give. It is not a book about HIV/AIDS. It is a book that offers practical tips for dealing with any type of loss and moving into acceptance and healing. Benjamin has worked with grieving individuals and groups for decades. He has also been trained and certified by The Grief Recovery® Institute (GRI).

His journey has brought him to a place of peace. As with everyone, Benjamin is still on the journey of healing. Once asked what he now believes, Benjamin responded, "I have no labels, no attachment to a particular belief. All I know is that I am a human, born of Spirit. And in Spirit, there is only love."

He now lives at Lake Tahoe, Nevada where he writes and delivers personal growth programs.

The vintage images of holly and roses courtesy of The Old Design Shop Vintage Image Treasury. These images are from a book of poetry called *Gems of Bryant* published in 1904.

