

# Grieve Well

# **During the Holidays**

## **Participant Handbook**



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# Making Holiday Plans

Here are some suggestions to help you decide how you want to celebrate your holidays:

**1) Communicate and honor differences:** Be open and communicate with your loved ones about how to celebrate the holidays. Different family members may have fears or grief triggers that are different than your own. Practice compassion towards each other and understanding.

**2) Prioritize self-care:** Make sure to set aside some time for taking care of yourself. The holiday season can be very stressful for many people, do not over commit yourself. Think of strategies for what you can do when you become emotional and if you start struggling with overwhelming feelings of grief. Who can you reach out to for support? What are some things that help to bring you comfort?

**3) Include children:** Remember the children who are affected by the loss of your loved one. They may feel guilty celebrating and having fun after someone they loved died. A reminder that it is okay to enjoy the holidays is helpful for children. Also, remember that you may want to celebrate the holidays to provide the children some joy, this can help give you a purpose for celebrating.

**4) Find ways to honor and remember your loved one:** When you can incorporate the memory of your loved one with your celebrations during the holidays, the memories can provide a meaningful experience.

**5) Always remember your holiday values:** Define what your holiday values are as you decide which traditions you want to keep, change, or skip altogether. Here are some questions to think about:

- a) Does this tradition reflect my holiday values?
- b) Is there something I want to do during the holidays but I don't because of fear or avoidance?
- c) What are some ways I can cope with my fears about the holidays so that I can participate in traditions that are meaningful to me?

# Mourning Your Past Holidays

Although it is difficult, it is important to take some time to feel the pain from your loss, including the pain of celebrating a holiday without your loved one. When natural disasters occur, the damage has to be surveyed before rebuilding can occur. This is true for our lives as well. We have to emotionally visit the damage that we have experienced from the loss of our loved one before we can experience recovery and rebuilding from the pain of our loss. We won't be the same and our holidays will be different than they were before, but we can find new meaning and fulfillment in our lives again.

**Here are some questions to think about to help you sort through your feelings about the holidays from the past:**

- 1) When will I feel the absence of my loved one the most?
- 2) Am I worried about becoming emotional during the holiday season? If so, what events am I most concerned about?
- 3) What is the biggest fear I have about the holiday season?
- 4) What roles did my loved one fulfill as we celebrated our holidays?
- 5) What traditions will I need to or want to change?
- 6) What am I most devastated about in regard to my holiday celebrations?

## Notes

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## Grief Triggers

“Grief Triggers” are anything that brings up memories and emotions related to your loss. You will find that there are many grief triggers during the holiday season such as ornaments, songs, food, and other associations with your holiday traditions and experiences. Some grief triggers will be expected, while others can take you completely by surprise. These triggers can be very painful, but over time they get easier to manage and become bittersweet. It is helpful if you realize these will come and that it will take some time before your memories become cherished and meaningful.

Grief Triggers can be found everywhere during the holiday season. The good news is that over time many of these grief triggers become bittersweet and easier to manage. The bad news is that it takes some time (and a little bit of effort) to get to this point, and until then, these triggers can cause sudden and unexpected grief waves to occur.

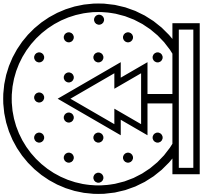
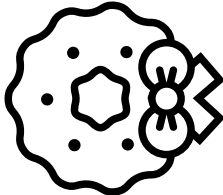
### **Here are some ideas to try that can help you cope with “grief triggers”:**

- 1) Anticipate the grief triggers you know will likely occur, think about ways you can handle the situation and that will help you feel more in control of your emotions
- 2) Usually, the anticipation of having a negative experience at the holidays is worse than what actually occurs
- 3) Remember that emotions cannot hurt you and that you have the capability of living with painful and difficult emotions
- 4) Don't be embarrassed to become emotional, most people will look at you with compassion rather than judgment
- 5) If you let yourself experience your emotions, they will usually dissipate after a while
- 6) The feelings we experience with grief are normal stress responses, taking some deep breaths will help your body to calm
- 7) Reach out to a family member or friend to distract yourself
- 8) If you are worried about becoming overcome with grief at a holiday event, have a plan so that you can make an exit if needed, such as sitting near the aisle at a holiday concert or letting the host at a party know that you may slip out

# Holiday Grief Triggers

Holiday grief triggers are often associated with familiar sights, sounds, smells, tastes, people, objects, and events. Take a few minutes to write down all of the potential grief triggers that you might encounter throughout the holiday season.

Sights	Sounds	Smells	Tastes	People	Objects	Events



# Grief During the Holidays Pact

## **You acknowledge that you have the right to feel what you feel**

Grief causes such new and intense emotions, many people say they felt like they were going crazy in the weeks and months following a loss. Regardless of people who tell you otherwise, it's okay and normal to feel what you feel; even during the holidays ... scratch that ... especially during the holidays.

## **You acknowledge that you have the right to decide how you want to spend the holidays**

It's okay to do things differently, it's okay to opt-out of things, it's okay to pace yourself, and it is okay to honor and remember your loved one's memory however you like. There may be the need for patience, compromise, and understanding with others, but ultimately you have the right to spend the holidays however you think is best.

## **You acknowledge your right to mourn past holidays**

It's okay to be really darn sad about everything that is gone, everything you miss, and everything that has changed.

## **You agree to communicate**

No two people grieve in the exact same way, even people in the same family who are grieving the same loss. Expectations around holiday rituals, traditions, and celebrations are fertile ground for family misunderstanding. The best thing you can do is communicate about your thoughts, feelings, emotions, needs, and expectations.

## **You agree to minimize negative coping**

When you are worn down, tired, and rushed, you are more likely to choose coping that can have a negative impact on your health and well being. Things like eating comfort foods, drinking alcohol or using other substances, and isolation seem like quick and easy feel-better fixes, but ultimately they do nothing to help you cope with your problems and only make you feel worse in the end.

## **You agree to take care of yourself**

With all the hustle and bustle, parties and gatherings, cookies, candy and alcohol, you may be tempted to let self-care fall by the wayside. Remember, coping is about more than processing feelings, it's also about taking care of oneself.

## **You agree to be mindful of your outlook**

You are entitled to all the anger, sadness, and bitterness you want. Just remember that even though these feelings are justified, they still come with personal and interpersonal consequences. Many people fail to recognize how, over time, negativity can impact their overall worldview. People with a negative effect may be more likely to find depressing, cynical, and suspicious explanations for events. They may feel as though their lives are globally awful, people are globally awful, they themselves are globally awful ' and believe that these realities will never change. "Bah humbug!"

Adapted from [whatsyourgrief.com](http://whatsyourgrief.com)



# Your Holiday Plan

**Get Together:** List the people you will be spending the holidays with. Who will be present for events, traditions, and celebrations? Call a meeting with these people to discuss a plan for the holidays. If you will be spending the holidays alone or with people far removed from your loss, complete the plan on your own.

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**Discuss Traditions:** What rituals and traditions do you anticipate being the hardest? Allow each member of the group to share their thoughts. Write these events and traditions below.

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# Holiday Planning Sheet

Our Family Traditions	Do I feel like doing it this year?	Do I want to skip it?	If I feel I need to do it, why do I feel this way?	Who can help or do it for me?	What could I do to make it different or easier?

Adapted from Karla Helbert, MS, LPC



# 64 Tips for Coping with Grief at the Holidays

1. Acknowledge that the holidays will be different and they will be tough.
2. Decide which traditions you want to keep.
3. Decide which traditions you want to change.
4. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one.
5. Decide where you want to spend the holidays – you may want to switch up the location, or it may be of comfort to keep it the same. Either way, make a conscious decision about location.
6. Plan ahead and communicate with the people you will spend the holiday with in advance, to make sure everyone is in agreement about traditions and plans.
7. Remember that not everyone will be grieving the same way you are grieving.
8. Remember that the way others will want to spend the holiday may not match how you want to spend the holiday.
9. Put out a 'memory stocking', 'memory box', or other special place where you and others can write down memories you treasure. Pick a time to read them together.
10. Light a candle in your home in memory of the person you've lost.
11. Include one of your loved one's favorite dishes in your holiday meal.
12. Be honest. Tell people what you DO want to do for the holidays and what you DON'T want to do.
13. Make a donation to a charity that was important to your loved one in their name.
14. Buy a gift you would have given to your loved one and donate it to a local charity.
15. If you are feeling really ambitious, adopt a family in memory of your loved one. This can often be done through a church, salvation army, or good will.
16. See a counselor. Maybe you've been putting it off. The holidays are especially tough, so this may be the time to talk to someone.
17. Pick a few special items that belonged to your loved one and gift them to friends or family who will appreciate them.
18. Make a memorial ornament, wreath, or other decoration in honor of your loved one.
19. If you have been having a hard time parting with your loved one's clothing, use the holidays as an opportunity to donate some items to a homeless shelter or other charity.
20. Send a holiday card to friends of your loved one who you may regret having lost touch with.
21. Visit your loved one's grave site and leave a grave blanket, wreath, poinsettia, or other meaningful holiday item.

22. Play your loved one's favorite holiday music.
23. If your loved one hated holiday music, that's okay! Play whatever music they loved.
24. Journal when you are having an especially bad day.
25. Skip holiday events if you are in holiday overload.
26. Don't feel guilty about skipping events if you are in holiday overload!
27. Don't get trapped. When you go to holiday events, drive yourself so you can leave if it gets to be too much.
28. Pull out old photo albums and spend some time on the holiday looking at photos.
29. Talk to kids about the holidays – it can be confusing for kids that the holidays can be both happy and sad after a death. Let them know it is okay to enjoy the holiday, and it is okay to be sad.
30. Make a dish that your loved one used to make. Don't get discouraged if you try to make their dish and you fail. We've all been there (or, at least I've been there!).
31. Leave an empty seat at the holiday table in memory of your loved one.
32. If leaving an empty seat is too depressing, invite someone who doesn't have family to spend the holiday with.
33. Don't send holiday cards this year if it is too sad or overwhelming.
34. Don't feel guilty about not sending holiday cards!
35. Create a 'dear photograph', with a photo of a holiday past.
36. Skip or minimize gifts. After a death, material things can seem less meaningful and the mall can seem especially stressful. Talk as a family and decide whether you truly want to exchange gifts this year.
37. Put out a photo table with photos of your loved one at holiday celebrations in the past.
38. Go to a grief group. When everyone looks so gosh-darn filled with holiday cheer, sometimes it is helpful to talk with others who are struggling.
39. Skip (or minimize) the decorations if they are too much this year. Don't worry, you'll see plenty of decorations outside your house.
40. Don't feel guilty if you skip or minimize the decorations!
41. Remember that crying is okay. The holidays are everywhere and who knows what may trigger a cry-fest. We've all been there and it is okay to cry (even if you are in the sock aisle at Target).
42. Volunteer in your loved one's memory.
43. Let your perfectionism go. If you always have the perfect tree, perfectly wrapped gifts, and perfect table,
44. Ignore people who want to tell you what you "should" do for the holiday. Listen to yourself, trust yourself, communicate with your family, and do what works for you.
45. Seek gratitude. I am the queen of holiday funks, so I know this is tough. But try to find one daily gratitude throughout the holiday season. Write it down, photograph it, share it on Facebook. Whatever. Just look for the little things.

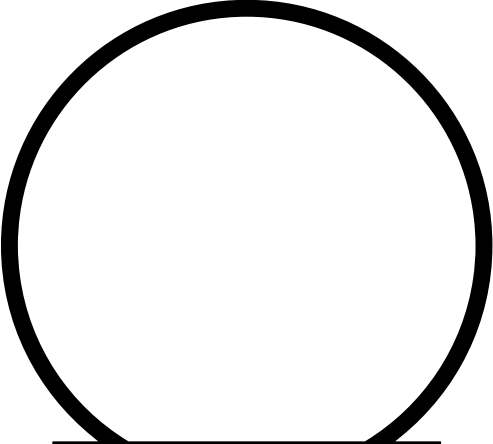
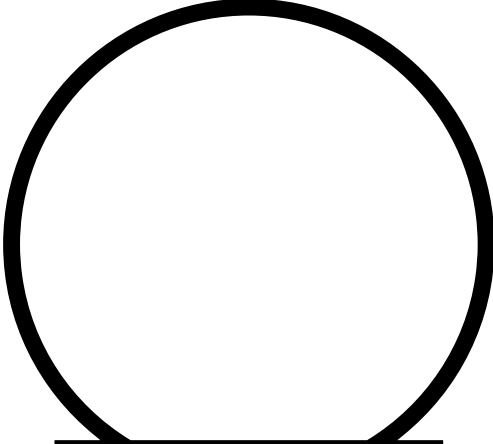
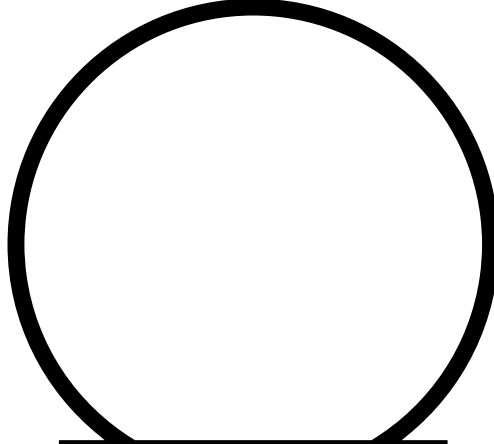
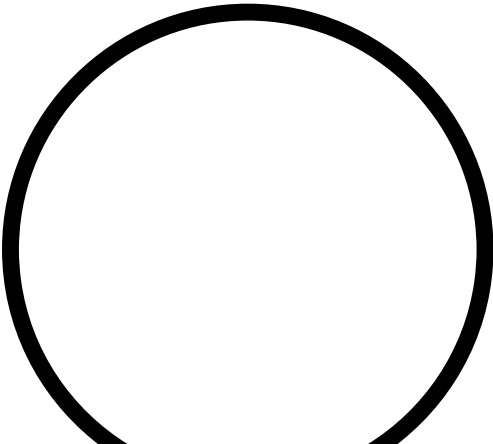
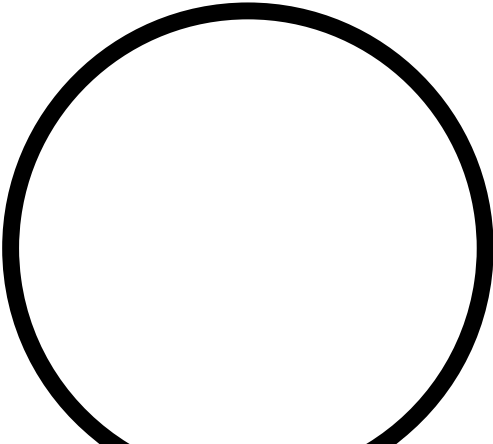
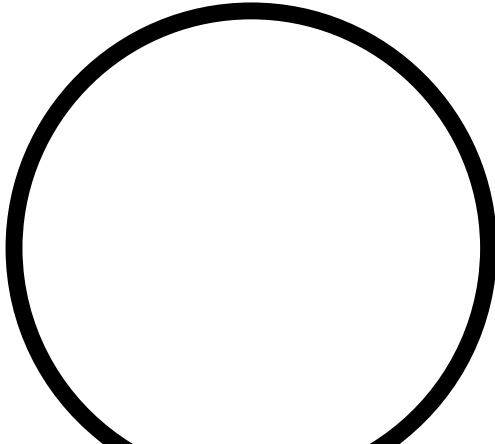
46. Watch the food. Food can make us feel better in the short term. Don't deprive yourself, but be careful that you don't let food become your holiday comfort.
47. Watch the booze. Alcohol can become a fast friend when we are grieving. If that holiday party is getting to be too much, head home instead of to the open bar.
48. If you are stressed about making the holiday dinner, ask someone else to cook or buy dinner this year.
49. If you are stressed about the crowds at the mall, cut back on gifts or do your shopping online.
50. Splurge on a gift for you. Grief can make us feel a little entitled and self-involved, and that is okay sometimes (within reason, of course). Splurge on a holiday gift for yourself this year, and make it a good one!
51. Say yes to help. There will be people who want to help and may offer their support. Take them up on their offers.
52. Ask for help. If people aren't offering, ask. This can be super-hard if it isn't your style, but it is important. Asking others to help with cooking, shopping, or decorating can be a big relief.
53. Have a moment of silence during your holiday prayer or toast in memory of your loved one.
54. Donate a holiday meal to a family in need through a local church, salvation army, or department of social services.
55. Identify the people who will be able to help and support you during the holidays and identify who may cause you more stress. Try to spend more time with the former group and less with the latter.
56. Make some quiet time for yourself. The holidays can be hectic, make quiet time for yourself to journal, meditate, listen to music, etc.
57. Practice self-care. I know, how cliché. But it is true – whatever it is that helps you recharge, do it. You can find some self-care tips here.
58. Support kids by doing a memorial grief activity together.
59. Donate altar flowers or other holiday decorations at your place of worship in memory of your loved one.
60. Prioritize and don't over commit. When the holidays are filled with so many parties, dinners, and events, save your energy for those that are most important. Look at everything you have to do and rank them in order of importance. Plan for the most important and skip the rest.
61. Make a list and check it twice. Grief makes it harder for us to concentrate and remember things. When you have a lot going on at the holidays, make a list even if you aren't usually a list-maker, and write things on the calendar.
62. Skip it. Really. If you just can't face the holiday it is okay to take a break this year. Before you get to this extreme, consider if you could just simplify your holiday. If you do skip, still make a plan. Decide if you will still see friends or family, go see a new movie, or make another plan.
63. Enjoy yourself! The holidays will be tough, but there will also be love and joy.
64. Remember, it is okay to be happy – this doesn't diminish how much you love and miss the person who isn't there this holiday. Don't feel guilty for the joy you do find this holiday season.

(Resource: <http://www.whatsyourgrief.com/64-tips-grief-at-the-holidays/>)

# Holiday Values Exercise

The stressors of both grief and the holidays can cause people to lose sight of what the holiday season is all about. This exercise is designed to help you clarify the values at the heart of your holiday celebrations.

**Instructions:** In each globe, write a few key words about what is important and meaningful to you in this specific area of the holiday season. Consider all events observations and celebrations.

 <div>Connection with Deceased</div>	 <div>Health/Physical Well-Being</div>	 <div>Community</div>
 <div>Family Relationships</div>	 <div>Friends</div>	 <div>Spirituality</div>

**Reflect:** Take a look at what you have written. What does this tell you about what is important to you and your family during the holidays? Which, if any, of these values are you currently neglecting?

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# Honoring a Loved One

## Mind mapping activity

Mind mapping is a great way to quickly brainstorm information and find connections. It can be a helpful tool for involving multiple people in the ideation process, and spark the sharing of memories and stories.

This mind mapping activity is meant to help you generate and select ideas for how to honor your loved one. You can do this activity alone or with friends and family.

### Instructions:

- 1) Print this page (or grab a blank sheet of paper) and a writing utensil
- 2) Set a timer for 5 minutes. Mind mapping should be fast, don't erase or edit your ideas as you work.
- 3) Write your loved one's name in the center of the page
- 4) Brainstorm themes that represent your loved one. These could be activities, experiences, hobbies, items, etc. Write these in larger circles surrounding their name. You can always add more or ignore circles.

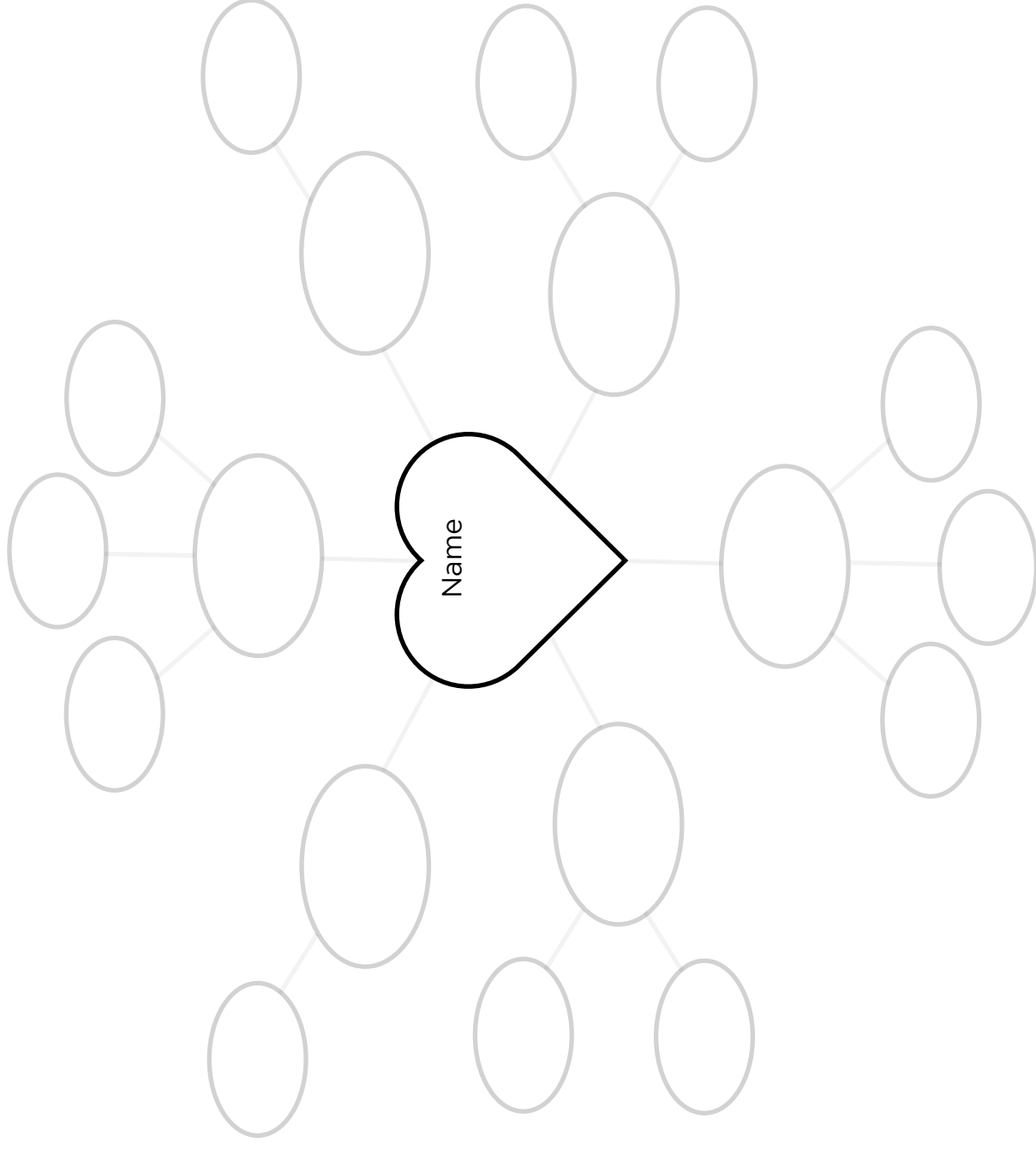
### Example: Baking

- 5) Break each of these themes into subthemes and write these in the smaller circles surrounding the theme.

### Example: Christmas sugar cookies

- 6) Continue to brainstorm things that represent your loved one and filling in the mind map until the timer ends.
- 7) Take a minute to look at what you brainstormed. Think about which of your major themes reminds you of your loved one the most? What stands out to you the most? Where is there overlap between your themes and subthemes?

Circle 1-2 themes and 1-2 subthemes as use these as a basis for planning a way to honor your loved one.







**1:1 Peer  
Counseling**



**Workshops &  
Training**



**Community  
Engagement**



GrieveWell provides resources and support to adults in grief, as well as those who surround them, in order to build a community that promotes healthy grieving and healing. We envision a community in which individuals grieve well so that they can lead a full life after loss.