

Chasing Away the Winter Blahs

By Elaine E. Stillwell

We can congratulate ourselves. We made it through the holidays. Hey, we're even standing up! We might feel exhausted, but we can pat ourselves on the back that we made it over another hurdle. But now what do we do as winter really sets in and everything seems gray and grayer? How do we get the energy to move through these dismal days; what can drag us out of bed on cold winter mornings; what can motivate us to rebuild our lives; how do we hang in there until the welcome signs of spring appear?

I faced those same questions after my first Thanksgiving and Christmas without my two oldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, who died in the same August 1986 automobile accident. Turning the pages of the calendar and dealing with the New Year seemed overwhelming, but at least now it was a different year than when they died. What kind of progress was I making? Was there something I actually enjoyed? Could I hear myself laugh? Was I learning how to do my grief work?

I found a few things that comforted me and seemed to shorten the endless days that challenged my broken heart. I was actually able to chase the winter blahs away or at least keep them at bay for a few heavenly hours. Each time I found something helpful I put it on my "Rescue List" so I could repeat it and remember it the next time I needed to scrape and claw my way out of that dark hole of grief. You, too, can create a list of helpers for "blah-free" living. You might like to try a few of mine.

Treasure that book. As I curled up on a comfy sofa with an inspiring support book, while enjoying a cup of coffee or tea or sipping a glass of wine, I learned from those who have walked before me, and it brought moments of relief and hope to my fragile spirit. Inviting comforting words into my soul and taking time to ponder their motivating messages was like handing me a roadmap out of my misery. It felt like an angel pointing the way to better days. Run to the library or to your favorite bookstore or order a recommended book online. Treat yourself to a few inviting support books to fight the blahs with potent, powerful ammunition.

Write your heart out. No one ever suggested that I journal each day, jotting down the ups and downs of my darkest days, but instinctively I helped my heart by writing about my children and about the things that helped me survive. I guess I was emptying my heart of the pain, pouring it onto paper. It helped me express what I was feeling, allowing all the suffering to spill out rather than to fill up and later be like Niagara Falls. Writing helped me discover my pattern of grieving, and that enabled me to make decisions and choices knowing what my heart needed as I was creating my new normal. Start jotting down a few sentences when you feel the blahs closing in. Discover the power of words as you reveal what makes you tick. Armed with the knowledge of what helps you and what makes you crazy, you can boldly face the enemy, and watch those winter blahs make a fast retreat.

Glue yourself to loving people. How wonderful I found it was to be surrounded by loving people who were simply there for me! No demands, no shoulds, no advice-just trying to make sure I was all right. They were like an invincible fortress around me as I struggled and fought with the gloom of the long, dreary winter months.

Surround yourself with loving people. They listen to your story, hear your moans and groans, wipe your tears, make no judgments and "walk the walk" with you. We may not be able to lean on immediate family members and close relatives since they, too, are battling grief, but good friends can be our anchors. They realize that our heartache and tears are a tribute to what we have lost. They acknowledge that the depth of our pain testifies to the depth of our loss. Our grief gives our loss significance, we don't want anyone to "fix" it or take it away. We just want to wallow in it, savoring every minute as we adjust to the loss of our loved ones. Don't let anyone hurry you. Make your own timetable. Go at your own pace. Stick with this special circle of loving friends. Welcome their calls or visits, share a cup of tea, designate chores to them that seem overwhelming to you, and bask in their love as they wrap you in hugs-all sure protections against the winter blahs.

Start counting. How grateful I was to have a husband who never left my side and one remaining child, a daughter, a true Taurus who chose life after burying her only brother and sister. I had a happy career

teaching little third graders, loving to friends to walk the walk with me, and my faith that carried me through the darkest days, filling me with its deep and gentle peace. Take time to peek into your heart and begin counting some of the blessings you may have been ignoring. Even though we feel robbed of a very special person, along with many of our hopes and dreams, our hearts can get a jump-start when we acknowledge the blessings that also are a part of our lives. Whether it's our spouse or our children, a dear friend, a rewarding career, hobbies that keep us busy, the comfort of music, prayer, nature, laughter or whatever else brings us joy, these blessings can be like wrapping our hearts and souls in velvet, cushioning them from the terrible blow we have suffered. Just acknowledge them to feel their soothing embrace and the strength they infuse in us. When we sense the "blahs" approaching, all we have to do is reach out and grab one of these trusty gifts to feel their healing power. It's almost like waving a magic wand for help or having a genie in a bottle appear to grant our wish for survival. Now's the time to start counting, stacking up all those blessing as we build an impenetrable wall for keeping the winter blahs out of our life.

Revive the spirit. It could be time to break out of our grief shell. Take a peek at the calendar and choose a date to do something that you enjoyed doing with your loved one. It could be as simple as going to a movie or buying a box of Valentine chocolate. I walked the beach, put up the Christmas tree and celebrate "Hallmark" occasions. All brought back precious memories. Remembering a date on the calendar gives meaning to a day and gives us something to look forward to. Maybe this is the time to schedule a get-away weekend to a relaxing resort or to visit a special person you would be thrilled to see. Every chance we got, my husband and I visited our daughter who was away at college, totally enjoying seeing her and delighting in the amenities of a lovely hotel nearby. Just the change of pace, getting out of the house, taking a ride, seeing different scenery, enjoying being with loving company or just eating inviting meals was a tonic for our aching hearts. Plan ahead and keep those winter blahs at arm's length by immersing yourself in the joys of yesterday that now provide sweet memories and also in creating the new joys of today.

Keep moving. When you're grieving, there's no such thing as too much physical exercise. Get yourself up and moving, even if it's just walking around the block. It gets you out of the house, in touch with others, noticing nature and away from sitting all day, perhaps popping pills or dinking too may "relaxers" or raiding the refrigerator. In those dark days, my daily exercise was faithfully walking my black Lab, Mickey, three times a day. It was a like a catharsis for me as I told him all my secrets and cried my eyes out. We could job and run, roll in the snow, and walk through rain, wind and sub-zero temperatures-refreshing and exhilarating to the spirit when grieving 24/7. Come to think of it, I think Mickey actually walked me around the block!

Today, may folks run straight to the gym, especially when they're having a bad day. They're not even afraid of those torture machines; they welcome them! They find that working out doesn't take away their excruciating grief pain, but it does clear their minds, exhaust their bodies, provide an outlet for their raw, pen-up emotions, enable them to breathe easier and perhaps even help them get a better night's sleep. The extra bonus is that they are getting in really good shape for the chase. The winter blahs won't have a chance! They will be chased right out of town!

Good luck outrunning the winter blahs using your favorite heart-helpers!

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