

A young girl's face is seen through a large, clear Christmas ornament. The background is filled with warm, colorful bokeh lights in shades of red, orange, and green, suggesting a festive holiday setting. The girl has a gentle, slightly sad expression, looking directly at the camera.

Grieving During the Holidays

BY DANIELLE TAYLOR

For many cancer patients, as well as friends and family members of those affected by the disease, “the most wonderful time of the year” can be anything but. However, even when the worst has happened, it’s still possible to find joy in the holiday season.

For the past several years, the holiday season has been bittersweet for Barbara, a Raleigh resident currently undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Her older brother passed away two weeks before Christmas in 1994, and she lost her father to prostate cancer a few months after her brother’s death. Eight years later, her mother died suddenly after a heart attack and a diagnosis of metastatic cancer, and with that, the entire family she had grown up with was completely gone.

"I have a very hard time with Christmas," Barbara says. "If there's any sadness in your life, that's when it comes home full force. I miss the connection of my parents and sibling." Although she acknowledges how blessed she is to have a wonderful husband and daughter, as well as extended family and in-laws "whom I don't consider in-laws—they're family," she says, the absence of her parents and brother always hits hardest during the holidays. And this year, with a cancer diagnosis of her own, their loss takes on a new dimension as she considers how her prognosis will affect the family she's created.

Barbara's story isn't unusual; with cancer currently accounting for more than one in four deaths in the United States, millions of American families have been touched in some way. And although the loss of loved ones is difficult all year round, the holidays can be especially hard, as they bring forth memories and traditions that can make celebrating a painful experience.

Whether you've lost someone due to cancer or have been diagnosed yourself and aren't looking forward to putting on a brave face for the coming festivities, there are ways to acknowledge your grief and still make room for a holiday season in which you can truly give thanks for the blessings you have. Finding what works for you will help you not only endure the next few months but appreciate and enjoy them this year and in future holiday seasons.

Taking It Easy

Even without adding complications from cancer into the mix, the holidays can be a highly stressful time, especially if you're used to taking on the brunt of the planning. Barbara is known for going out of her way to ensure others are happy and well taken care of, and at Christmastime, this translates to hosting family events, buying thoughtful gifts for everyone on her list, decorating her home inside and out and generally putting other people's needs before her own. This year, anticipating her lower energy levels and limitations due to her recovery, she has allowed herself to lean more on friends and family and plan a lighter holiday load that she'll be able to manage.

"I normally decorate every square inch downstairs!" says Barbara, laughing. "This year, however, we're going to do a tree and my nativity scene, and we're going to put candles in the windows, but I won't be doing the heavy decorating I normally do. And I'll do a lot of the present-buying online." Last year, when her mother-in-law had breast cancer, Barbara cheerfully hosted the family's Thanksgiving get-together, and this year, her in-laws are more than happy to return the favor.

Whether you're grieving the loss of a loved one or struggling through your own mental and physical limitations, acknowledging this will help you and everyone around you enjoy the holidays that much more. Even if you've always hosted Christmas parties or Thanksgiving dinners, the world will not end if you're not up for it this year. Give yourself the time you need to heal.

Making New Memories

As family circumstances change, holiday traditions are often forced to adapt, and by embracing these changes instead of fighting them, it's possible to honor cherished memories of past holidays before cancer's impact. In fact, you and your family can find creative ways to remember lost loved ones or commemorate a battle against cancer and make new traditions that you can look forward to.

"My father used to get Hallmark motion ornaments," Barbara remembers. "One year, he got a train one and put it on the tree. It annoyed my mom to death—it's very loud! Now, [my husband] puts it on our tree every year." To remember her brother, who died of AIDS, Barbara's family always reads the Christmas story from a Bible her grandmother had given to her brother, and they also attend an AIDS Walk in his memory.

If you'll always remember 2011 as the year you battled and beat cancer, you may want to find a way to commemorate that. Even something as simple as a goofy ornament of a smiling stick figure with a bald head or a photo of you and your family gathered together at your first Relay for Life event can remind you each holiday season of your strength and resilience.

Giving Thanks

Even if it feels like the last thing you might want to do, finding ways to count your blessings can help give you reason to celebrate this holiday season.

Before her ordeal with cancer, Barbara says, "I knew I had friends, but I didn't know how many I had ... and how wonderfully dear they've been. They've gone so far above and beyond." And while her journey has clearly been difficult on her husband and high-school-aged daughter, leaning on them has added some unexpected benefits to their lives. "I feel closer to them than I ever have before," Barbara says. "I see God's hand in this, and he hasn't let go of me yet. I'm so much more blessed than I realized I was."

During a crisis, many people are surprised to learn the level of support offered by friends and family members. If you find yourself mired in negative emotions due to cancer's effect on your family, don't stifle or ignore those completely legitimate feelings; take time to think of the positive aspects of your situation. Cancer often forges stronger friendships and family ties, and it can also serve as a wake-up call to remind you how important these people are. Take the opportunity to cement these bonds, which can give you a reason to persevere and give thanks all year round.

Even through her continuing medical discomfort and distress, Barbara, who admits she can be a "glass is the whole way empty" kind of person, has found reasons to be grateful. "If I hadn't been having the stomachaches last summer, they wouldn't have done the CAT scan that found the pancreatic cyst, and without that, they wouldn't have done the MRI that found the cancer," she acknowledges. "And this could have been a whole lot worse." **tbc**