

Father's Day

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Fathers play a special role in an individual's life from birth through adulthood. Most fathers wear many different hats; he may be the breadwinner, "Mr. Mom," the disciplinarian, the advice giver, the chauffeur, the sports coach, the handyman, the cheerleader, confidante, or buddy. On father's day, young children as well as grown children likely find themselves thinking about this unique relationship. Yet following a tragedy such as 9/11, traditional holidays such as Father's Day take on new meaning, bringing reminders of happier as well as more difficult times. The holiday can be especially difficult if you are a surviving father, father of a beloved child who died, father to a child whose mother died, or your own father died on 9/11. Grandfathers may also find themselves with a heavy heart as they mark another day without a special grandchild or bear witness to a son still grieving.

Experience, personality, family history, and relationships all impact how one chooses to acknowledge any holiday. On Father's day a father who is a survivor, may be extremely grateful for being able to continue sharing in his children's lives. Yet a father who is grieving the death of a spouse, or a grandfather who has faced the death of a child or grandchild, may have conflicting feelings – attempting to call up comforting memories but feeling sad about not being able to add new ones with someone special. Mothers may have questions about how they should help a fatherless child. And bereaved children may struggle with how to acknowledge a father who has died or perhaps a new "father" who may have been added to the family.

Breaking a holiday down into three periods of time can be helpful: before, during, and after.

- *Before:* Anticipation of the holiday can be the most stressful time. As the date comes into focus, it can start to loom large in people's mind. Worrying about it can lead to attempts to avoid any unpleasant real or anticipated feelings or situations – perhaps resulting in not making plans or shrugging it off, saying "it's no big deal."
- *During:* The reality of the holiday often does not match one's imagination or plan – it is usually better than expected or at least not as bad. Be prepared to change course if need be when the day or an activity doesn't feel right and an alternative is available; it can be OK to leave a gathering early, or call a friend, or go for a walk.
- *After:* There is often a sense of relief once the holiday is over. It's important to recognize that getting through difficult days can take effort and is an accomplishment in itself. Taking stock of what worked or what you want to change next time is useful.

General guidelines for dealing with father's day

- Have realistic expectations but don't expect too much. If you think the day will be difficult, acknowledge this reality and understand it won't ever be the same as before 9/11.
- Give yourself and others permission to accept their own feelings and have the holiday they want. It can be reassuring to know that it is normal to have a tough time on certain holidays and celebrations. However, it is also acceptable and appropriate to feel hopeful and realize it is possible to feel joy again.
- Have specific and limited goals for the holiday. Goals can be as simple as "just get through the day" or "have a family dinner and rent a favorite movie."
- Think about what is most upsetting, consider what has worked or not worked in the past, and make changes accordingly. If having the traditional pancake breakfast made you sad then make an effort to try a picnic lunch. If having a normal routine is comforting then schedule usual activities ahead of time.
- Some are comforted by helping others on special holidays, perhaps volunteering or bringing gift baskets or baked goods to a hospital or nursing home.

Specific suggestions for individuals and families

- It is understandable for fathers struggling to find their way without a child to still feel heartache. Hopefully you are able to seek and hold on to still cherished memories. Reminiscing with those who shared happier times with you and a child can be helpful.
- Be mindful of everyone involved and the special needs of children.
 - Consider a child's wider community. For example, if a child's father has died, it may be helpful to check in with school teachers about any planned holiday themed activities and make necessary adjustments.
 - Children and teens may have their own preference for handling the day. Talk as a family about dad's favorite places, foods, and hobbies and find ways to incorporate them into the day. It may be a good time to bring out old videos or photos to reminisce.
 - Children can feel guilty or ambivalent about embracing new fathers or grandfathers. People can not and should not be replaced, new relationships take time to develop and evolve on their own. Respect and help children manage these complex feelings and relationships
 - Brainstorm new ways to commemorate the day. Given the opportunity, children often come up with inventive and creative ideas. You may want to make a time capsule putting in things from the past and adding things for the future, or start a video scrapbook.
- Even the most competent and organized fathers who must raise children alone are likely worn out. Without a partner to share the joys and trials of childrearing and decision making father's day may bring additional loneliness. Try:
 - focusing on all you've accomplished – rather than what's undone

- letting children care for you for a change
 - gathering with other fathers for some well deserved adult time
 - acknowledging all those who have helped you be the kind of father you want to be
- Adult sons and daughters whose father died may still – and always - feel emptiness.
 - If the relationship was conflicted or difficult, the holiday may trigger these unresolved feelings. You now have choices about how and when to handle the past and develop future positive relationships with those who may fill nurturing parental role.
 - Siblings may find comfort and feel less alone by being with each other. Yet they may have had different relationships with their father and need to be sensitive to and respectful of such differences.
- Reach out to other men in your life who have influenced you. Love, guidance, and support may have come from a teacher, uncle, or neighbor. They will be honored and appreciative of your acknowledgment.
- Getting professional guidance for finding ways to carry memories forward or make peace with past difficulties can be useful.
- Fathers and grandfathers often symbolize strength, wisdom, and caring. For sons, daughters, and grandchildren impacted by 9/11 it is helpful to recognize what special qualities have been passed on to them. Embracing and using your own inner strength and wisdom and caring for others ensure that a father or grandfather's legacy will continue.