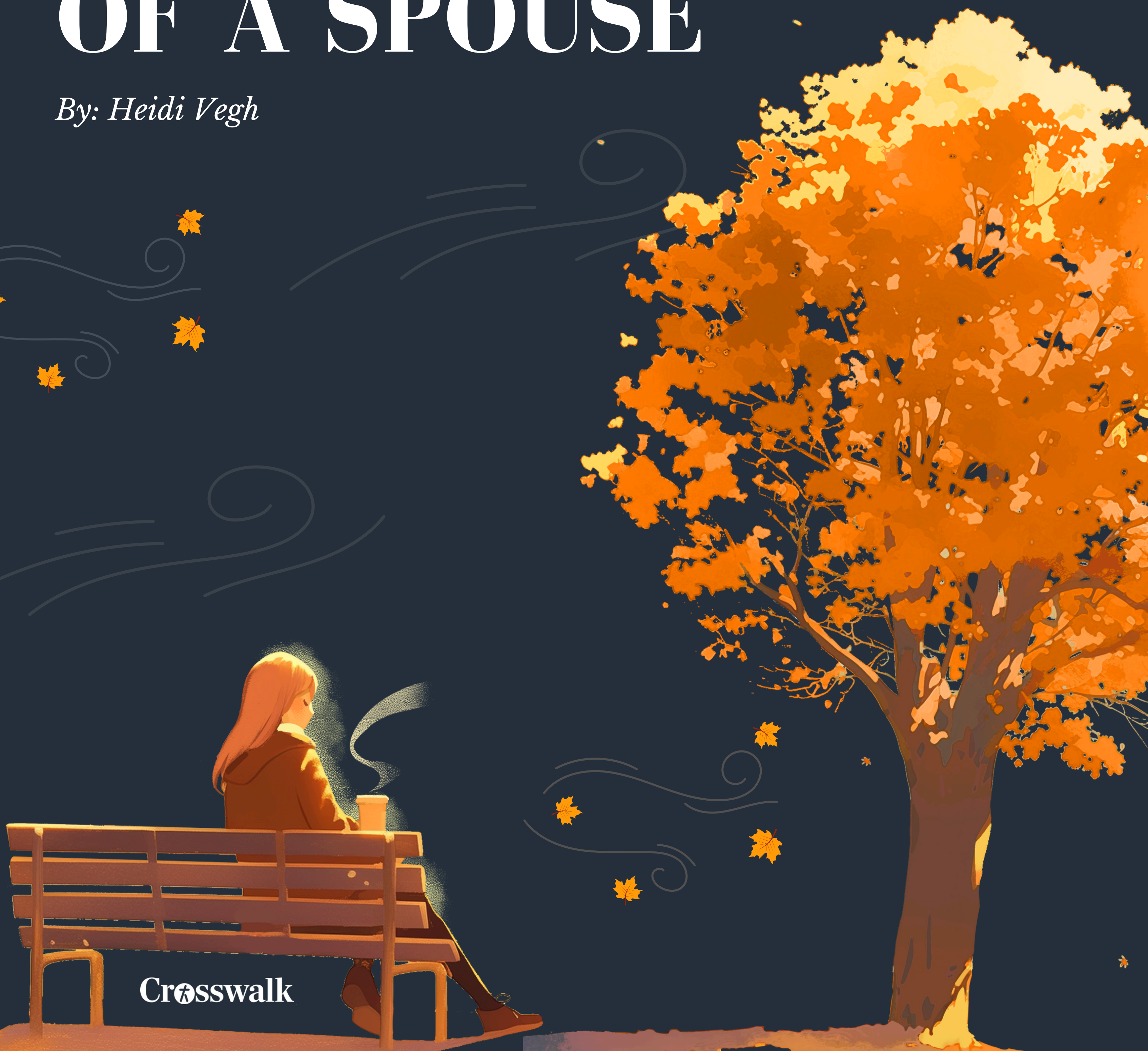


5 WAYS TO COPE WITH THE FIRST HOLIDAY SEASON AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

By: Heidi Vegh



SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR YOURSELF



The first year of holidays without your lost spouse can be fierce. Decide how you want to celebrate, what you want to stay the same, and what you want to be different. It is okay to bow out at dinner at Aunt Judy's house because you know you will be surrounded by loving couples, slapping your epic loneliness in your face.

Although canceling everything may sound like the best idea, disconnecting from other people who love you and want to celebrate with you can be unhealthy. Avoid what you simply can't handle and ask God to give you strength for the rest. It can often lead to more healing when we push through the hard things rather than avoid them.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

What do I *realistically* have the emotional and physical energy for this holiday?

Which traditions feel comforting, and which feel heavy or painful?

What is one new or modified tradition that might bring relief or hope?

Which invitations or gatherings feel supportive, and which feel likely to overwhelm me?



MAKE TIME FOR SELF-CARE, AND DON'T RESIST THE GRIEF

Grief is hard work and can be hard on our bodies and minds. Remember to allow yourself the space to grieve. You may be constantly trying to fill the void with other things or self-medicate as a way of coping, but this will only prolong the healing you so desperately need. Take time to read the Bible, go to a Bible study, go on a prayer walk, or listen to worship music. Spend time with people who will lift you up, support you in your pain, and allow you the space to release your harsh feelings. Expect it to be a challenging time, and plan things accordingly. You don't need to say yes to everything. Just say yes to the things that you know will fill your cup.

“Resistance to grief increases suffering and can even go as far as to expand it to distort what the holidays can offer us in the here and now. Resistance reveals our fear of grief, loss, and change and can leave us feeling victimized so that the holidays take on a focus of avoidance, losing the light that they may still offer us.” - Mark Bigley, LCSW.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- ▶ Where am I noticing resistance in my grief right now?
- ▶ How have I experienced God's comfort recently?
- ▶ Who in my life helps me feel safe to grieve openly?
- ▶ What spiritual practices bring me closer to peace?

DO SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE ELSE

This may be the last thing on your mind as you feel you can barely function. But give it a try. Go through your items, donate to a Christmas charity, or sign up to serve food at a local shelter. Ask your church how they will reach out to your community over the holiday season, and sign yourself up to help. Even if just one hour or one afternoon, it will give you another layer of healing that you need. Taking the focus off your devastating situation for a little bit may help you big time.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

▶ What small step of generosity could I take right now?

▶ How might God use my story of loss to comfort someone else?

▶ How can I balance rest and service during this season?



TAKE A TRIP



The desire to escape our pain is significant when we lose our spouse. Unfortunately, grief will tag along no matter where you are or what you are doing. However, if you feel the holidays will do you in, find a place you can go to spend the holidays that will ease the sting, if only a little bit. This won't take away your pain, but it may be helpful to pull your attention away from your grief and to focus on traveling and spending time in a place that won't be loaded with reminders of holidays past. If you remove your regular holiday traditions, replace them with something else. Don't hide in your pjs all day; this may exaggerate your holiday grief.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- ▶ If I were to create new traditions for this season, what could they look like?
- ▶ What places or traditions carry the heaviest reminders of my loss?
- ▶ How can I structure my holiday time to support healing instead of deepening loneliness?
- ▶ Where might I go that feels peaceful or comforting right now?

HONOR YOUR LOVED ONE

Even though your spouse is gone, it may help to include them in the celebrations. Some simple ideas could be:



Make a memorial ornament

Visit their grave

Make a toast for them at dinner

Play their favorite music

Set a place for them at the table

Set up a memory table with pictures and things to remember them by

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

▶ What do I most want others to remember or know about my spouse?

▶ Which of these remembrance ideas feels most healing to me?

▶ What traditions or memories best capture who my spouse was?

▶ How can I honor my spouse's memory while still giving myself permission to experience joy?

▶ If I could say one thing to my spouse this Christmas, what would it be? Consider writing it as a letter or prayer.

REMEMBER THAT IT *WILL* GET BETTER

God sees and loves you. He is weeping with you as you experience profound loss amongst the expectations of the holidays. It seems wildly unfair that you must go through the holidays with such a heavy heart. But remember—the pain won't be this excruciating every year. *As you pass challenging milestones, triggers, and special days, the grief makes itself cozy in your heart but won't sting hard forever.* You will learn to live with the suffering, and as you build a new life around your loss, it will slowly be filled with unique traditions, new people, and a new way of doing things that will help ease the pain and bring healing.

Grief can repeatedly stab us in the heart with triggers and memories, but it teaches us to appreciate life at an entirely new level. We learn to cope with deep pain, push past it, and watch for God to work it all for good. (Romans 8:28) Because ultimately, He is where the joy is, and He is the one that can bring us to a life full of healing, once again celebrating the holidays full of new life.

Heidi Vegh is a writer, speaker, and ministry leader. She is a remarried mother of four, navigating the blended family life after the loss of her first husband to cancer in 2013. She longs to use her writing as a way to encourage others who have experienced loss and guide them on the road to healing. She contributes to her blog found at www.mrsheidivegh.com, sharing stories and devotionals of faith stemming from her loss and healing, mothering, and her blended and complex family. She graduated from Southern New Hampshire University with a degree in Creative Writing and English. Heidi is the Women's Ministry Director at her local church and has a deep heart for sharing Jesus with women and encouraging them in their faith walk. When she is not writing, she loves to travel, read, craft, and experiment in the kitchen. Visit her [Facebook](#) and Instagram (@mrsheidivegh) to learn more.

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