

Holiday Grief and the Lessons from Tangled Christmas Lights

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I knew the holidays were coming but I didn't want to deal with them and I really didn't want to put up any of the holiday decorations. Well-meaning family and friends kept telling me that I needed to "get into the spirit" of the holidays. I agreed that I would at least get the boxes out of storage and go through them. I soon realized that each box held memories of past holidays and celebrations. At times, I was overwhelmed with the feelings that I experienced as I opened the boxes that held my precious decorations. By the time I found the holidays lights that were at the bottom of a box, I

wasn't in the mood to deal with the impossible task that was before me as the lights were a tangled mess.

As I tried to untangle the ball of lights, I began to see this mangled mess as part of my grief journey. I felt tangled in my grief and my emotions were like a ball wadded up within me. It would have been much easier to just toss the lights aside and purchase new ones but I didn't want to face the crowds at the store.

For some reason, I got lost in the distraction as I tried to figure out the best way to untangle the strands of lights that were before me. I plugged them to make sure they worked before I would spend any time dealing with them. Through the tears that had gathered in my eyes, the lights seemed to sparkle. I found comfort in their brightness and I became determined to conquer the mess.

As I sat there trying to find which way to move the wires to get them free, I began to see how this tangled ball of lights represented my experience of grief. I realized that the only way I was going to get through this experience was to be patient. I've learned a lot about being patient as I deal with my grief. It would have been easy, so many times in the past year, to give up and to walk away from the memories and the pain. But when I faced my frustration and fears, I found strength I never knew I had.

This was a similar challenge was I tried to untangle the strands of lights. As the ball became smaller, I knew I was making progress. Each time I thought I was past the worst tangle, I would find another one, but this time it was smaller and easier to figure out. As I work through my grief, the same can be said. Each new challenge seems smaller and easier to manage because of the progress I have already made.

And as I gazed upon the lights, I realized that each of the colors represent a part of my grief. The red lights remind me of the love I shared. I recalled the happy times and the wonderful memories I hold in my heart. The red lights also remind me of the things I need to stop doing such as denying my feelings and blaming myself.

The blue lights represent my sadness. There are times when I feel “blue” or sad. Once I own my feelings of being down they are easier to accept because I’m embracing my pain instead of denying it. Admitting that I was sad made it easier to reach out and ask for help or to find things to distract me.

The yellow lights represent the brightness in my life as I smile at all the memories I hold. I found myself laughing at some of the past holiday experiences and the things we did or shared. I realize how full my life is because of the life we shared. The brightness truly outshines the sadness.

The orange lights remind me that the warmth of our love will always shine upon me because of the life we shared. I hold so many memories and I have been blessed to know the gift of love.

And the green lights represent my hope for the future. Hope gives me permission to move forward with my life as I learn to live with my loss. Learning to live with loss doesn’t mean forgetting the person who died but being able to create new memories to compliment the memories already held.

As I finally got the last of the lights untangled, I felt a sense of accomplishment that I stayed with the task and didn’t give up. When I plugged them in, I noticed that some of the bulbs were burnt out but the strand of lights were still lit. It reminded me that even though those we love may no longer be with us, they are still part of our lives. Just as the other lights stayed lit, when someone we love dies, it doesn’t mean that we have to stop living.

Alone, the colors would not be as bright but together they provide a soft, comforting glow. The lights represent aspects of my life and my grief. The red, blue, yellow, orange and green lights represent my love, my sadness, my memories, my joy and my hope. I have the opportunity to keep the love glowing through my memories and the life I live.

I never imagined that those tangled Christmas lights would help me find meaning in my grief and strength to face the holidays.