

# O Christmas Tree— Why Should I Adorn Thee?

## 10 Reasons Why You Should Consider Decorating a Tree When Grieving By Nan Zastrow



We dragged the tubs of Christmas ornaments from the basement just like we always did before he died. They sat on the living room floor unopened. A naked evergreen tree sat unadorned in the corner of the room beckoning to be touched and beautified. In my heart, there was an incredible emptiness and fear. The thought of putting up a Christmas tree after the death of our son, Chad, created questions and strong protest. Why should I put up a Christmas tree? Isn't it selfish to put up a tree, a symbol of family and joy, when my loved one was not here to share it with us?

Together we finally gave into the necessity of trying to normalize the holiday by decorating the tree. To lighten the task, we decided to create a theme of angels, bells, stars, and white lights. Then we hung ornaments with special stories mingled among the traditional ones. As difficult and emotional as it was, we did it! And I must admit it was worth the moments of tears and sadness. Standing back and looking at the shimmering tree filled our hearts with hope.

Celebrating or not celebrating is a personal choice. There is no doubt, traditions bring back a flood of memories. Decorating a tree is one of them. If putting up a Christmas tree laden with sparkling lights, cherished ornaments, and memories seems difficult no matter how long it has been since your loved one died, here are some reasons to assure you that it is okay and even healing to carry on this time-honored tradition.

### **Reasons to consider PUTTING UP AND DECORATING A TREE:**

**1. There is reason to celebrate.** If sharing a story, baking your loved one's favorite dish, enjoying the beauty of the seasonal elements, or gathering in the comfort of others makes you happy, then you should absolutely celebrate the season. Decorating a tree is a celebration in many ways. It's creating a new beginning every year. Christmas is not a story of hope. It is HOPE. Christ is the reason for this season. That alone gives permission to celebrate.

**2. Challenging yourself to do something difficult builds resilience.** Overcoming this task, brings you one step closer to managing the unpredictable and lingering emotions of grief. Resilient people develop strong coping skills from adversity, and they bounce back. Stimulate your determination to discover and celebrate how far you have come on your path to healing.

**3. Putting up a tree often introduces conversations about which traditions are still comfortable and which ones need to change.** These important conversations within a family establish the entire plan for holiday celebrations. If it feels good to decorate as usual, this may be the one variable that families confirm that even though some things change, some can remain the same and continue to be a source of treasured family rituals. Introducing new or modified traditions isn't about forgetting the past. It's about moving forward in the present.

**4. Unpacking the decorations generates memories.** Keepsake ornaments often recall forgotten stories, milestones, and humor. Yes, it may be painful, initially, but oh how precious the memories! Add a memorial ornament to remember your loved one every year. Hanging it next year will make you smile!

**5. Trimming a tree with music in the background can soothe the raw emotions of grief.** Music heals and can help you process the sadness you feel during the holidays. Music draws out memories that can connect you with your loved one including favorite songs, bonding words, and memories of special events. It also reduces depression and anxiety while it improves your mood.

**6. Decorating a tree can be inspirational and reflect who you are.** When you use your creativity in the comfort of your home, you can set a style that reflects things you like, colors that appeal to you, and a theme of things you like. Life has changed and so can your tree become a source of creative joy to banish the holiday blues. Start early. Research shows that people who decorate early tap into the spirit of the season and this makes them happier. Inspire yourself by recreating childhood memories or be motivated to create a new theme. Either can trigger those happy hormones.

**7. Putting up a tree can bring families together.** You have experienced a life-changing event and family and friends may not know how you wish to celebrate the holiday. When you decorate your tree, it sends a message to family and friends that though the holidays may be difficult you want to preserve stability and family values. Choose to make this a family event whether it's dragging a fresh evergreen out of the woods or primping the branches of your store-bought tree. Do it together.

**8. Putting up a tree earlier in your grief makes it easier next year.** The longer you delay the more likely you will never appreciate or continue the benefits of this simple holiday tradition. Don't allow one year to become 3-4 or more. There is no right or wrong. Some people are 100% happy with their decision to not decorate a tree or celebrate the season. However, research suggests that people are better off doing "something" rather than nothing at all. Let the tree bring you joy!

**9. Putting up the tree just feels good to be acting "normal" during these less than normal circumstances of life.** The reality is holidays will come and go year-after-year. At some point, you can't ignore them anymore. It's important to resume living and do things that seem normal. Remember how the pandemic changed lives? So has grief interrupted your life with unexpected and abrupt changes. It's time to live again. You deserve to feel good and enjoy the beauty of the season. What was normal before can become a new normal again.

**10. Decorating a tree that shines brightly represents your love for the person who died.** All the rituals you take pride in during the holiday express that you will never forget. These are "connectors" to memories and happy times. Reawaken that kind of spirit. Add a star to the top of your tree since a star represents the Star of Bethlehem and points to heaven. A lighted tree beams with the message of Hope. How could you ever forget your loved one at such a beautiful time of year? Light up a tree and let it shine!

**"I'll always feel you close to me and though you're far from sight, I'll search for you among the stars that shine on Christmas night."**

Holiday traditions are what you want them to be. It takes heart and soul, and you need to be invested in the task, or it won't do you or anyone in your family any good. A time will come when you look forward to celebrating your holidays blending old traditions as well as creating new traditions based on life changes as they occur. Adding color, lights and some sparkle can't hurt. It may actually lift your spirits. Even if you are decorating alone and don't expect a lot of visitors during the season, light up your life. If for no other reason, put up the tree because you love it! And it feels good! Your loved one encourages you in spirit and would want to see that you still can find Love, Peace, and Joy in this simple tradition.

About the Author

Nan and Gary Zastrow are the founders of Wings-a Grief Education Ministry since 1993 after the death of their son, Chad, to suicide and his fiance 10 weeks later. As certified bereavement consultants, their ministry of hope provides education to the bereaved. Nan is the author of 7 books, a Free quarterly online grief E-Letter and dozens of articles published through various resources. Additionally, Wings offers support groups, currently through virtual ZOOMGRIEF. Nan continues as a columnist for Grief Digest magazine since 2003. Visit the website at: [www.wingsgrief.org](http://www.wingsgrief.org) or the Wings Facebook page.