STEARNS BROOK PRESS

When Someone Is Missing

A Holiday Grief Planner

For one holiday, birthday, anniversary,
or family gathering.

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A little room for remembrance.
A practical plan for the day ahead.

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Begin with the day ahead

A meaningful date can come with a lot of decisions. Where will you go? What will you say? Will someone mention the person you miss, or will the room seem determined to talk about everything else?

This planner gives those decisions a place to land. Use it for one approaching day. You can return for another occasion later, with a different plan.

You may be grieving a death, a changed relationship, or a gathering that can no longer happen as it once did. Use the language that fits your situation. You decide what stays private.

Start with the pages that would make the day easier. A few words are enough. If you have very little energy for planning, go straight to My plan for this day on page 13.

The plan can change. Something that felt possible last week may ask too much today. You can make a new choice without defending the old one.

The page I want to begin with

One thing I hope this planner will help me decide

This planner offers education and reflection. It does not provide psychotherapy, medical care, diagnosis, or treatment. Stop or skip any prompt that feels overwhelming. A qualified mental health professional can help when you need support beyond these pages.

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Name the occasion

Begin with what is actually coming up. Include the part that is difficult to explain.

The occasion and date

Who or what I am missing

What I expect to be hardest about this day

What I would like to have room for

What other people may be expecting from me

Which of those expectations I want to accept

You can write about a person, a relationship, a place, a role, or the way life used to feel.

Choose what to keep change or skip

Look at the traditions and tasks attached to this occasion. A decision for this year does not have to become a rule for every year.

Keep
A tradition or part of the day I want to include

Change
Something I could make smaller, share with someone, or do another way

Skip
Something I want to set aside this time

One thing I want to try, if it still feels right on the day

Who needs to know about these choices

“This year, I’m keeping _____ and changing _____. I’ll let you know what I decide for another year.”

You may leave any category blank.

Make the plan fit your capacity

Consider the whole cost of the day: time, travel, money, preparation, and the work waiting afterward. Choose an amount you can reasonably give.

Time I can give to this occasion, including preparation and travel

Money I am comfortable spending

Tasks that would use the most energy

Ways I could make the day more manageable

- ☐ Come for one part of the gathering
- ☐ Stay closer to home
- ☐ Bring something ready-made
- ☐ Ask someone else to host
- ☐ Reduce shopping or gift exchanges
- ☐ Arrange help with cleanup
- ☐ Choose a quieter visit
- ☐ Decide closer to the date

The change that would help me most

Something I can leave unfinished without creating a problem

A plan that depends on you finding extra energy at the last minute may need another look.

Answer the invitation

Choose a reply you can say or send. Edit the examples until they sound like you.

A shorter visit
“I want to see everyone. I can come from _____ to _____.”

A changed role
“I can join you, and I need someone else to handle _____ this year.”

A decision later
“I’m not ready to commit. Can I let you know by _____?”

A kind decline
“Thank you for including me. I’m going to stay home this time. I’d like to _____ another day.”

The reply I want to use

Who I will send it to and when

What I will say if someone keeps asking me to change my answer

An honest answer can be brief. You can keep the reasons private.

Ask for help with one real task

Choose a task someone else can understand and complete. Include the details they would otherwise have to ask you for.

The task I would like help with

The person I could ask

When it needs to happen

What this person needs to know

“Could you help me with _____ on _____? It would involve _____. Please tell me if that won’t work for you.”

My message in my own words

A smaller request or another option if they cannot help

One other responsibility I can share

Help might be a ride, a meal, an errand, animal care, a few hours of company, or taking charge of the group messages.

Choose a way to remember

If remembrance belongs in your plan, choose a form and a moment that fit. It can happen privately, with one person, or in a group. It can also wait.

An option I might want

- ☐ Make or serve a familiar recipe
- ☐ Write down a story
- ☐ Look at a photograph privately
- ☐ Invite people to bring a written memory
- ☐ Listen to a song at a time I choose
- ☐ Keep a meaningful object nearby
- ☐ Visit a familiar place if practical
- ☐ Leave the remembrance unplanned this time

What I would like to do

Who, if anyone, I want to include

What I need to ask before making this a shared activity

What would make me change or stop the plan

“I’d like to _____. Would that feel welcome to you? It’s okay to sit it out.”

Ask before reading another person’s words, displaying their private photographs, or putting them on the spot to speak.

Decide what stays private

People may ask questions, make suggestions, or tell stories you were not expecting. Think about what you are comfortable sharing and where you want a boundary.

What I am comfortable discussing

What I would rather keep private

Changing the subject
“I’m going to leave that conversation for another time. Tell me about _____.”

Protecting a story
“Please check with me before sharing that with anyone else.”

Ending advice
“I know you want to help. What I need right now is _____.”

The words I want ready

A person who could help me redirect a conversation

Different people can remember the same person differently. You can speak from your own experience without agreeing to every version of the story.

Simplify the gathering

Use the parts that apply whether you are hosting, visiting, or spending the day at home.

Practical decisions to make

- ☐ Who is coordinating the plans
- ☐ How much preparation I am taking on
- ☐ What food I need to arrange
- ☐ How I am getting there and home
- ☐ Who is covering care responsibilities
- ☐ Who is handling cleanup
- ☐ Which messages I need someone else to answer

My one responsibility for the gathering

What someone else has agreed to handle

The simplest food or household plan that will work

A detail I want to confirm before the day

The person I will contact to confirm it

If you are staying home, decide on the basics there too. An ordinary meal and one check-in can be a complete plan.

Leave yourself room to step away

It can be easier to change a plan when the practical details are already clear. Decide where you could take a break and how you could leave.

A comfortable place where I could pause

How I will get home or end a call

Who needs to know if I leave or change the plan

Anything that needs arranging first, such as a ride or care coverage

“I’m ready to head home. Thank you for having me. I’ll check in _____.”

“I’m going to take a little break. I’d like _____ to come with me / some time by myself.”

My own words for stepping away

My backup plan if the original arrangement changes

Arrange a safe ride if you will need one. Avoid relying on someone who may be unable to leave when you are ready.

Choose a small point of comfort

Think of something ordinary that would be welcome during the day. You can choose company, quiet, a familiar object, or a few minutes with a view.

Something I might want nearby

- ☐ A person I can text
- ☐ A comfortable place to sit
- ☐ A familiar photograph or object
- ☐ A meal or snack I have arranged
- ☐ A song I can choose to play
- ☐ A window with a view
- ☐ A short visit with someone I trust

What I want to have available

How I will arrange it

If you want a quiet nature pause, sit where you are comfortable and look at one part of the view. Notice the light or the movement of a branch. Keep your eyes open and breathe normally. End the pause whenever you want.

One detail I noticed or would like to notice

What I would prefer if quiet time feels unwelcome

You can choose conversation, movement, or an everyday task instead. Comfort is personal.

My plan for this day

Use this page on its own or bring your earlier choices together here. Keep it where you can find it.

Occasion and date

Where I plan to be and for how long

One part I want to keep

One part I am changing or skipping

A remembrance I may choose

Help that has been arranged and who is doing it

A person I can contact and the best way to reach them

How I can take a break or leave

My backup plan

One thing I want ready when the day is over

Review this close to the date. Update anything that has changed.

A note for someone supporting me

Complete only what you want someone else to know. Share this page with a person you choose. You may ask them to keep it private.

For

The occasion I am planning for

What I would like you to understand

A practical way you could help, if you are able

What I would prefer you not do or share

If I change my plans, I would appreciate

A good time and way to check in with me

Thank you for asking what would be helpful.

For the person receiving this page: check that you can do the task before agreeing. Ask permission before sharing the note or inviting others into the conversation.

After the day

Return when you have room to look back. The day does not need a grade.

What happened that I want to remember

What was harder than I expected

What helped, including any practical help

A choice I am glad I made

What I need in the next day or two

Someone I would like to thank or contact

If the day brought up more than you want to carry alone, reach for someone you trust or a qualified mental health professional. You can ask for support without having a polished explanation.

Carry forward what was useful

You made a plan for a day that asked something of you. Some choices may have helped. Others may need changing. Keep the details that will save you work next time.

A choice I would make again

A choice I would change next time

A memory or small detail I want to keep

Where I will keep this planner

When another meaningful date approaches, you can begin with a fresh page. Your plans can make room for the person you miss and the life you are living now.

Erica R. Buteau is a Certified Master Grief Coach, author, and publisher in northern New Hampshire. Her work explores grief, remembrance, caregiving, family stories, and life at Legacy Acres at Stearns Brook Farm.

For longer reflection, explore Where the Forest Heals and The Journey Through Grief and Loss. Find Erica’s books at ericabuteau.com/books and stearnsbrookpress.com.