

Surviving the Holiday Roller-Coaster

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The winter holiday season brings emotions aplenty. Gift-giving and family gatherings bring heights of joy to many people—and the intensity of the holidays can trigger equally potent emotional lows.

The following list suggests a number of common downers. Be prepared! Planning ahead can prevent emotional crashes, and transform potentially difficult times to opportunities for uplift.

Home Alone Blues

Ending up alone during family-oriented holidays probably wins the prize for the most frequent source of holiday depression.

Plan ahead. Make a list of others you know who may also be far from family this year. Join together for celebrations and meals. Alternatively, call Volunteers of America. By helping others on the holidays, you can help yourself to the enriching comradery that abounds where everyone is rolling up their sleeves and pitching in.

Empty Chair Syndrome

The pain of losing a family member from death or divorce may re-surface with special poignancy at family gatherings. Even people who have been separated from loved ones for decades find longings for their former companions surging up as they celebrated events that used to be shared.

Instead of dwelling on thoughts of the missing loved one, focus on the people who are there. You can't block nostalgic thoughts from coming up, but you can choose how soon ; you leave recollections of the past to refocus on the present.

Tug of War

Shall we go to dinner with my family, with the family of my spouse? Do we share the holiday with family, or with friends? In the case of divorced households, who will get to enjoy the children and their holiday delight?

Some families find they can avoid battles by setting up a predictable schedule, like alternating holidays (one place for Thanksgiving and the other for Christmas) or years, in a pattern that everyone agrees upon. Others prefer to vary which holiday events are shared with whom from year to year, but this flexibility usually requires a fairly cooperative environment lest everyone end up feeling slighted.

Target Practice

Do you have a family member who specializes in critical comments? Are there hurtful relatives that you normally avoid, whom holidays force you to be near?

Try switching from thoughts about the content of the negative comments to what may be causing the negativity. Is the criticizer chronically depressed? Over-stressed? Jealous? Fearful? Remember, criticisms often mean the speaker has a problem, not the receiver.

Also, separate the message from the method. If you can remove the critical tone from what was said to you, can you find a kernel of useful information?

Fountains of Folly

When holiday feasts overflow with food and beverages, overeating can put on depressing poundage, and over-drinking can wreak havoc.

Again, the key is to plan ahead. Visualize carefully how much you will eat and drink, and then pride yourself on sticking to your plan. As to alcohol, if certain family members predictably drink too much, prevent unpleasantness by discussing the potential problem ahead of time.

Many families are eliminating alcoholic drinks from their holiday fare rather than risk a ruckus from those who drink too much.

Kitchen Slavery

When everyone else is talking and laughing in the living room, do you find yourself chained to the stove?

Designate a kitchen crew so a fun group works together on everything from table setting to cutting carrots. Alternatively, specify potluck, and have each of the guests, children included, bring contributions to the meal—place cards, flowers, salad, main courses, or desserts.

Excessive Altruism

In giving to everyone, else, are you wearing yourself out?

Be realistic about your limits. Consider how much money, time, and energy you can give without beginning to feel that you are over-giving and running on empty. If money is the limited resource, substitute creativity for expense. Less expensive but thoughtfully selected gifts are appreciated every bit as much as those that stretch the budget.

If time is the scare commodity and too much to do threatens your sanity, simplify. Discuss with family members what you can eliminate from your gift-giving, letter-writing, and cooking. Buy one-gift-fits-all presents like magazine

subscriptions for all the aunts, or pencils with their names printed on them for the nieces and nephews. Request help from other family members. Decide that you will delegate to others all tasks except the very few that only you can do. Remember, no one loves a martyr.

Déjà vu

When you return to your family, do you feel like the clock flipped back into your childhood?

As a rule, families that seldom gather together pick up where they left off. If you left home at 18, your parents and siblings may still treat you as the teenager you were then.

The good news is that, in most families, if you act differently, they will too. If you pitch in right away to help, for instance, they will soon see the responsible adult who has replaced the resistant teen. Showing adult warmth, interest in others, helpfulness, and kindness to your parents and siblings is likely to change their earlier-era attitudes toward you. If not, you at least will feel good about your growth.

People Overload

Do you short circuit from too much time in crowds? Are you overwhelmed by too many interactions with too many people?

Accept that different people have different tolerances for time in crowds. Know your optimum dosages, and plan accordingly. Go late and leave early. Or take time-outs. As soon as frazzled feelings begin to irritate you, leave the hubbub by taking a walk alone outside or a brief nap in an extra bedroom.

Performance-itis

Do you feel that you have to create the perfect holiday?

Remember, holidays are neither a test nor a stage production. **Holidays are Holy Days.**

Let yourself take time to reflect on the important values in your life. Take a deep breath. Look around you. For what do you feel thankful? **Enjoy.**
