

Tending the Soul During the Holiday Season

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Holidays are supposed to be happy times, but what if we don't we feel happy and what can we do about it?

There are a variety of reasons why people might feel depressed during the holidays. For starters, the holidays carry high expectations. There is an implied message that one is **supposed to be happy** during the holidays. In fact, "Happy Holidays" is a popular expression. If what you're feeling inside during the holiday season doesn't match the expectation of how you're 'supposed' to feel – how everyone around you *appears* to feel – that alone can be a bit of a letdown.

Holiday commercials, holiday movies, holiday cards – all things "Holiday" essentially reinforce the "Happy Holidays" theme, which, from a commercial standpoint, is predicated upon time with family, sweet holiday moments with a significant other, giving and receiving gifts, and, perhaps the most prevalent – the enjoyment of holiday feasts.

You might, however, find yourself thinking:

"Time with MY family is fraught with difficult conversations or uncomfortable silences (or worse)...and can re-open old wounds..."

"Being in the holiday ambiance and seeing everyone else enjoy time with their significant other makes me feel even more alone..."

"I can't afford to buy gifts."

"The focus on food, from Halloween candy to Christmas cookies, not to mention the holiday 'feast' makes me anxious, nervous and full of fear."

Creating What Works For You ...

If you find yourself "wanting to get the Holidays over with," this is a sign that you have given up all your power and it is time to get it back. With careful time and attention, you can turn the holidays into something that work for you, not against you.

'Tis The Season

The winter solstice season is a time of less daylight and more darkness. This means spending more time "inside," (indoors and internally). This season beckons us to be more still, to listen, observe and reflect. As silent observers, we notice the sacredness in things we have come to perceive as ordinary.

Use holiday time to honor and express gratitude for things that are easy to take for granted, but whose absence would devastate us.

Whether it's people, places or things, take time to appreciate whatever it is you hold sacred.

Take stock of what is good in your life and the world and acknowledge it. Show appreciation while being creative and having fun. This is what brings back “the Christmas Spirit” or Soul to the Holidays.

Meaning Leads to Meaningful

Knowing the reason for a custom is what gives it meaning. ...otherwise you're just going through the motions. For example, why do we bring trees inside and decorate them?

Many years ago, during the winter season, people would bring evergreen trees inside to honor them for their unique, awesome ability to keep their leaves (pine needles) through winter. They would string lights and place ornaments on the tree, celebrating its ability to endure the hardship of winter with grace.

Knowing this information can take something as simple as decorating a tree and make it a much more meaningful experience.

Whatever holiday(s) you celebrate, take some time to research their history and significance and take time to reflect on that. Where did the Holiday get its name, why are certain foods eaten on that day, how were certain traditions created, what is thought to have happened on that day? All of this will help you connect with the deeper meaning that holidays stand for, putting the emphasis back where it should be and away from the commercialization that all too often gets top billing.

Let People Know What a Gift They Are to You

Acknowledge your family, friends, teachers, colleagues and neighbors who did something good during the year or have a quality you appreciate. Point out the good and let them know you notice. You can tell them in person or in a Holiday card. And don't do any of it out of obligation, do it only if it is the truth.

Plan Ahead

Come up with and prepare plenty of cool things to do with family and friends: Trimming a tree, going on a bike ride, caroling, movies, baking cookies, walks, picnics, etc. Fond memories created during these activities are gifts that keep on giving after the food has been eaten and the decorations have been taken down.

Reaching Out to Heal Old Wounds

If you have a problem with a relative (or someone else) and know you are going to see them over the holidays, reach out to see if you can make things better. Tell the truth, but without ANY judgment. Take responsibility for your part in things. Offer ways to try to make things better. If this is just not going to work, then spend time working on how you can manage your own feelings about the person and how you would like to respond rather than react when in this person's company. HOW you respond to this person, whether a relative or anyone for that matter, is totally up to you. It might be hard, but remember you are doing this for you...

It is not how we respond in easy or positive situations that will be the key to our happiness, it is how we respond when challenged or under duress. *Always remember ... whomever we are having a problem with becomes our most important teacher in this area.*

Look at this time as an opportunity for yourself to grow. Try to set an intention for your time with someone you are struggling with. Perhaps you want to try to have one pleasant interaction

with that person, even if it's something so simple as passing him/her the mashed potatoes with a genuine smile on your face.

There are a lot of ways you can make a difficult situation work FOR you and the reality is that you can extract from **all** possibilities a different kind of holiday season than the one you fear, but it is up to you. You must visualize how you would like things to go with your friends and your family, at your job and on the streets you walk. Visualize what will make the Holidays something meaningful for you and what YOU will do to make that happen...**and then pursue it.**

Giving

Spend time decorating those less fortunate with good will. Visit the elderly, collect toys for children in the hospital, contact a church or your local social services department as they usually have names of needy families you can "adopt" for Christmas. You can bring Christmas to this family who wouldn't otherwise receive gifts. It will lift you up when you see the faces on little humans as you hand out presents from Santa they thought they would never see. Go sign up to do something that will help make the Holidays special for others, which will, in turn, make them more meaningful for you.

"A gift consists not in what is done or given but in the intention of the giver or doer." - Seneca

You don't need much money for gifts. You can bake goodies, paint or draw something, or make a music CD to give away. If you enjoy crafts, try making homemade ornaments or a wreath of pine branches, pine cones and berries. You can wrap a piece of sea glass with wire and hang it on a leather strand as a necklace. Something handmade from the heart often means the most to people.

Food

Apply whatever you learned above to how you will handle food during the Holidays. Find ways to take responsibility for the way it will go. Visualize several scenarios where you successfully navigate the various experiences you are likely to encounter. Come up with ways to take control when it comes to situations where you will find yourself having to deal with food.

Figure out how to take care of your own needs. Plan ahead and bring food you like to add to the party food table. Eat enough so you are not overly hungry when lots of tempting goodies will be around that might be hard for you.

If you want to bake, do it with a friend and be sure to sample your own baking. Making food for others that you don't even try is a way of restricting. For some people, it can also be a way of vicariously eating by giving it to others, so it's important to also eat at least some of what you make.

If your family or friends tend to focus too heavily on food during the holidays, try to join in by asking about special recipes that have been handed down over the years, or find out why your family has always served a certain item, or thank someone for a new dessert and ask how they chose that one. This will help you include yourself in the experience of the food and help add meaning to the feast you see in front of you.

Also, don't forget to bring up other conversations and be prepared with other activities that are fun so you can also change the focus from food.

If you are in treatment for an eating disorder, get ideas from your treatment team about how to best handle holiday meals. You might even want to ask a family member or friend to a session with you to discuss things that will make eating during the holidays easier. You might find it helpful to set a few specific, achievable goals so that you are focused and not overwhelmed by trying to do everything at once during a time when you are faced with many additional challenges.

Always know that any misstep is just that and you can get right back on track. What often happens is that once there is a troublesome experience with food, people throw in the towel and stop trying and let things get worse. This only means more repair to do in the end, so if you get thrown off, do what you can to get right back on track. If at all possible, reach out and talk to family and friends for support.

Take Time for Self-Care

If you start to feel anxious and overwhelmed during any Holiday gathering – or even just being out and about in the chaos and crowds of Christmas shoppers, take a moment for yourself. Right then and there. You don't need to wait until you get home to decompress.

If you're at a party, and there is a quiet place outside, go there for a few minutes. Listen to the peace and stillness you hear and appreciate the break you're giving your brain. Take some deep breaths. Even if you can't always find silence, you can always take a few deep breaths anytime, anywhere. Through observing your breath, you will feel, and experience, the calming stillness that is **always** there even with all of the noise around you.

Try to wait until you feel the anxious energy (the energy that brought you outside) leave your body. Once you feel your body return to neutral (e.g., your shoulders will relax, your breathing will be softer), then go back inside.

If you're out and about and you start to feel overwhelmed, sit down on a bench and observe the people walking by. By being still while everyone else around you is moving, you can take time out to be an observer. Notice everyone going about their lives and appreciate being human.

Staying centered in any situation where you feel yourself start to become overwhelmed will help prevent anxiety from building up inside of you, boiling over and affecting your experience during the holiday season.

Spreading Peace

Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men

The above saying is something we have probably all heard. It is a translation from the original manuscripts that make up the bible. We recently discovered that many believe the following to be a more correct translation: "*Glory to God, and on earth peace, toward men of good will*" (Luke 2:14). This translation seems to be saying that '*peace on earth comes to men of good will.*'

Make it your mission to be a human of good will during the holidays and act with the knowledge that peace on earth is directly tied to our behavior.