

## No Joy at the Holidays? Ways to Help

While many people are happily humming along with Christmas Carols and merrily shopping for gifts, the holidays can be an especially difficult time for some. According to New Leaf Resources' Marriage & Family Therapist Norm LeClercq, because the holidays are so closely associated with family, there are pros and cons.

"If there is estrangement, unresolved conflict or even if a family cannot gather because of distance, it can be a difficult time," LeClercq says. "It can be especially painful if it's the first holiday since the loss of a loved one or a divorce. It's difficult to feel joy because the loss is fresh and the person's absence becomes more real."



For many, something like a holiday song can bring back positive memories, but then the cold hollowness of missing a loved one creeps in. "It is the nature of grief to work through multiple layers of our knowing and being," explains LeClercq. "When we think we have finally come to terms with the loss, another pocket of awareness made accessible by the season's sights and sounds causes us to experience the sting of unyielding facts. As we allow ourselves to go through our grief, it gradually dissipates, the intense pain passes, we survive and know joy again."

In cases of divorce, where children are involved, there is an added stress of who has the children and for how long. Previous family traditions are no longer workable and the already hectic schedule suffers further fragmentation. LeClercq adds, "as frustrations, added financial limitations, inconveniences, and disappointments abound, ho, ho, ho becomes no, no No!" LeClercq points out that with any divorce, the whole extended family is faced with uncomfortable decisions. "How do we relate to our family member's ex? What if we see them at a social event? Is the divorce something we are free to acknowledge or will that stir up hurt feelings?"

Because women often have the responsibility of choreographing the holidays, on top of their regular responsibilities, it can be especially stressful for them. Typically, they have to be concerned about the financial piece; the shopping, cooking and wrapping; they are often the ones more in tune with the family politics and emotions as the nurturers. "The more plates you get spinning, the more you need a routine," says LeClercq. "But the problem with routine is you get into a trance like state. You are efficient, yet disconnected with yourself, others and God. The agenda becomes the most important thing and our inner resources become depleted." LeClercq goes on to explain that routines can be great stress reducers, but if self-care is not part of the routine, we lose sight of what's important.

"There's an old analogy of the guitar string. If there is not enough tension, the sound is off key," describes LeClercq. "But if there is too much tension, it snaps. A certain amount of tension in life is healthy. But when there are many demands and so little renewal, we wear out, we're tired, have no energy and we're irritable. When a song used to lift your spirits is now irritating, there is too much stress/tension happening."

There are many things you can do to reduce stress at the holidays including setting limits, scheduling time for yourself and letting go of the "picture-perfect" Christmas. There is only so much you can do in 24 hours. You might disappoint others in the process, but for good reason. Schedule time for rest and replenishment. This is just as important as the other tasks on the "to do" list. Remember the Sabbath. Give yourself permission to not be perfect. Perfection doesn't matter. What really matters is the time with others, not a spotless house or that the perfectly decorated tree.



For more information, call

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