

From
Holiday Hassles
to Happiness



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Part One of Three: You're Not Alone

As you are approaching the holiday season, it is the middle of many other winter holidays, besides yours. All of us have more to do during the holidays than any time of year. Holidays can be challenging, at least for much of the time. In the USA, there are three huge national holidays within five weeks: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years. Millions in the USA celebrate other holidays like Hannukah, and Kwanza in the same time period. You may be prone to FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out. All that celebrating makes you vulnerable to being cranky. For some, mental health can suffer.

If you're one who loves everything about the holidays, you are among the super lucky. And if you feel upbeat all through the winter celebrations, I'm happy for you.

For most of us there is room for greater de-stressing. For many of us, there is at least one activity that is unwanted. Too often it feels like an obligation. Often, that activity is not entirely needed, either.

This is not about bah-humbug. It's about finding what works for you. Each of us is different, with a particular set of values, expectations, and desires that can change at various times for assorted reasons.

If you are one of those who are already starting to feel a wee bit pushed-pulled, or out-of-sorts, you are not alone. And if you are a woman, you tend to have a bigger role in the extra work of continuing traditions. That can cause tension which causes a domino effect.

If you feel stressed, imagine how it might be for those that suffer any kind of mental illness. As an author, I advocate for the mentally ill and their families. My expertise comes from being a family member of mentally ill parents. My depressed father became even more serious, more rigid, and more emotionally distant around the holidays. My manic-depressive, schizophrenic mother's behavior was always more rageful, unpredictable, and bizarre at holiday time. Intensity of symptoms were common over any holiday because the responsibility was too much for my mother. Her symptoms were far worse than on other special days because the darker days made life more problematic. That meant that Thanksgiving and Christmas stress was compounded by the darker days for her. Without even realizing why, holidays are hard for most.

At an early age, I knew that winter holidays, especially, could be a serious escalation of hell. More on that can be found in my book: *Breaking Through Concrete: The Gift of Having Mentally Ill Parents*.

<http://tinyurl.com/cvl46v4>

The purpose of this series of three chapters is to contribute to holiday peace on earth. Knowing the dark side, I continually strive to make holidays meaningful

and enjoyable. That is what gives me focus and relaxation.

Decades ago, I created *Rising to The Occasion*, a business for creating personalized, joyful celebrations. Also, as a coach, I help people experience a more satisfying relationship. Besides, you have a relationship to each holiday too, whether you participate in it, or not.

Understanding the word ‘holiday’ means ‘holy day,’ I take into account the fact that in December, there are dozens of different religious and ethnic holy days that need peace in their households, too. So, I am writing to everyone who struggles and anyone who wants more serenity and joy this time of year.

Whether or not you, or someone you know, resists the holidays, this article is for you, especially if you feel a twinge of discontent around winter. These special times can have a fabulous function in our lives. They can be memorable for all the right reasons. And, that takes real intention and preparation.

The holiday expectations can be a setup for an emotional drain, or to a downright disaster. No matter what winter holidays you celebrate, you’ve been sold a particular type of holiday. Whatever you’ve been taught, that celebration is the only ‘right’ one. Right?

Depending on your religion, culture or family background, you’ve been taught how it’s supposed to look down to the most specific detail. And some of us were taught one tradition at home, and a different one at school.

Many people don’t experience what they would like to feel. They can’t “get in the spirit” whether before or during the holidays. And afterwards, many of you wonder why all that work, all that shopping, all that cooking, and all those gifts, produced a feeling of emptiness. For some people, holidays sap their energy, and for some, they are possibly worse off than if there were no holidays.

First thing to do is to notice if there is something missing for you in the current way you celebrate. What lit you up in the past may not do it for you now. See if there is anything you might want to update or uplift about how you honor this time of year. Ask yourself: “What might stir up more joy this season? What can light up my life during the holidays and beyond?”

From your individual perspective, you can be considering how the holidays are for you, and you may be noticing how it is for others in your life. If you have to deal with others over the holidays, it is critical that you prepare for the possible difficult person in your midst. The usual holiday challenges for all of us are harder for someone with a mental illness. It’s even harder if that difficult person is you.

Mental illness is not one disease. It varies about as much as individuals vary. So, if you are doing fine, give an extra dollop of kindness to one who suffers.

Think of the song: *It's The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year*. It certainly can be. Often, holidays are memorable times that we want to re-create each year.

Yet, rarely can you count on it being the most wonderful time of the year. On social media, everyone looks joyful. Meanwhile, it can be the most stressful time of the year. How can you balance the two? You don't want to sing that song of stress. For some people, daily life is like walking up steep steps every day. Then holidays come with each step looking like a mountain. That's how holidays affect some people with physical, mental, or emotional challenges.

It is not only neurodiverse people who find change in routine painful. For huge numbers of people, holidays pose a problem. Some of those people work with the public and you have to maneuver around their moods. Do you react negatively, or do you give others some space?

No matter where you are on the stress continuum, remember others could be feeling the same, or worse. In the next article, I will describe obstacles to holiday happiness that you may relate to. Once identified, you can see more clearly what to do about them. Later, I'll be listing techniques and practices to create a peaceful season and a happy celebration that fits you personally.

Part Two:

Possible Hassles; Assessing Your Situation

In Part One of these three parts about Holidays, Hassles, and Getting Happy, I asserted that if you can be upbeat all during the holidays, then I salute you. I don't want anyone to get triggered by these things I am citing here. Most of us find occasional stress. So, by naming challenges, you can actually dissipate most of them. It is when we are unaware that makes challenges seem bigger. Knowing what bothers you and knowing you're not alone, can lower the stress. That gives you a chance to circumnavigate the issues.

After mentioning some things that get in the way of the holiday season being sane and happy, I'll be covering some solutions and specific ways to bypass the obstacles. Then, you have a better chance to enjoy the season.

Here are some possible obstacles to holiday happiness:

1. People Overload

You'll likely be with every age person: teens who don't want to be with family, adults who have different political or religious views, etc. There may be too many people for you. Or, it may be people you don't want to be with.

The holidays are extra difficult for many of us. On the radio a few years back, I heard that 90% of people do not like some aspect of the holidays. One reason people gave was they didn't want to be with people they don't like.

With mental illness during the holidays, depending on the type and severity, things can be far more stressful for them, as it can be for you, as a friend, or a family member. Realizing that the sufferer gets agitated or upset at holidays does tend to affect you.

Conversely, the opposite of people overload is some people suffer from loneliness during the holidays. That's another version of the belief that things should be different.

A corollary to loneliness is memories of so called "better" holidays or more ideal holidays that one thinks others are having. Remember your creativity can change that.

2. Time Pressures; Over Doing; Over Giving

Life is already very full. Then December brings obligations, if you accept them as such. Shopping, mailing, baking, decorating, and partying are some examples. All of these can be delightful, but maybe not all at the same time. All of it in a limited amount of time, can be difficult and demanding. Holiday perfectionism pushes us to do more than is healthy for us. This can affect almost any of us.

You, or someone in your family, may not be able to handle much of the holiday, though you may be wishing you, or they, could do more. Notice if your expectations are causing tension.

Another complication is denial. We deny that we, and others, have trouble doing it all. When we are extending ourself, we think our loved one should do more, or better. The judgment fuels disappointment, and resentment reigns. Those targeted as slackers may have self-judgment. Possibly, they might take it out on you.

3. Financial Pressures: Spending money you don't have

Lots of people go into debt over the holidays with gift-giving, or travel costs. Children's toys cost more now than ever. Ditto for adult gifts. Marketing makes expectations higher.

- When it's all over after holidays, how are you left?
- Are you enriched?
- Or, did your spending turn unsatisfying after all?
- What does it do to people to get all sorts of things and those things don't satisfy at all? Or for not more than three days?

The whole process can leave children and adults depressed. It can disconnect us. Parents are so rushed, there's no time for connecting with their children.

- Are you *giving* instead of *being*?
- Are you deepening your spiritual life?
- How could you get closer to your spirituality during the holidays?
- Are you connecting to your inner light?

Being with loved ones enhances your life and theirs. Often it makes us, and our planet, ill to shop just to shop. I hear horror stories. People are resentful for all they have to buy, and how little joy they feel in return. We're suffering from what we've created.

Children actually can get crabby from too many gifts. They can get overwhelmed from too much. Look at what is important to you for the holidays. Only you know that. I can't tell you what that is.

Are we buying the product, or the way it makes us feel? Parents are often manipulated by the children who are manipulated by the advertisers, who work for the corporations. And much of what you are paying for is the cost of the advertising that had you think you had to buy it in the first place.

4. Mental Health Struggles: Less daylight can affect you.

The memory of grief and loss can negatively affect you anytime, but at holidays the loss seems catastrophic. Traditions intertwine past to present. We tell ourselves it was better before, reigniting the pain of loss.

Also, given the outer darkness in the northern hemisphere, we're all a little 'thrown off' our game at this time. Depression tends to affect more people during the winter. If you have a friend or family member who suffers, they may seem more problematic to you. They may be doing all they can to keep it going, in whatever capacity they can. Or, if you are a sufferer, life may feel more tense trying to live up to some ideal.

December includes the darkest days of the year. That is the month when the days get quite noticeably shorter every day until the solstice. An extreme time of year, solstice is a turning point when days get slightly and gradually longer each day. There's an emotional difference stirring after winter solstice. Hope fills the air.

All through ancient times, people recognized the darkest day as a sacred time. They celebrated the coming longer days. The solstice is on the far edge of the most imbalance between day and night. The very thing that people crave, the light, has been staying a slightly shorter time since the summer solstice.

For those living in the northern climates, we look forward to the warmer days, too. Dark days can be challenging. Cold days can be a struggle, too. It takes courage to take care of yourself, so you're not quite as affected by that intense time of year.

Some people suffer from SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder. For many winters, I used to suffer with SAD. It is a serious joy-killer.

5. Social Pressure and Family Dynamics

Ask yourself: Are you doing all your doing because you love it? Or, are you doing it because you'll look bad if you don't? It's fine to do everything, if you truly enjoy it, and the effort pays off in satisfaction of job well done. For too many, the effort can result in burnout, or thinking it "wasn't enough," or "this or that didn't go perfectly." Give yourself grace.

6. Overindulgence

With so much going on, you might miss the gym workouts, or fall off the healthy diet restrictions you have. The temptation of rich foods, abundant treats and plentiful drinks, can get out of control quickly. No one has to give it all up. Sometimes, we need to choose how far we can safely go. If we don't make these considerations before the start of the holidays, we may regret it.

Part Three:

What to Do for Peaceful Holidays. Strategies for Getting Happy.

No matter what you must deal with during holidays, no matter the holiday stresses, there are strategies. Here are some methods for getting happy over holidays. This is not all there is. It is a place to start.

1. Gratitude makes holidays happy. My belief is that being grateful for people, places, and things in your life is a requirement for happy holidays.
2. Find satisfaction somewhere. Often, we find immediate gratification in food, drink, or purchases. Yet, none of us are really satisfied by those things for long. Find what makes you happy now, something that supports you in maintaining happiness. It may be writing, or communicating with friends who satisfy your heart. People can support you in enriching your life. Maybe evaluating your life is what you want to do at this time of year. You may be thinking: "But what about maintaining the friends who expect me to go out with them, eat or drink with them, schmooze with them, buy for them? What can I do to keep up with all that?" Consider what your needs are, too.
3. Relax. When you relax in one area of your life, you can relax in other areas. Vice versa: when you're uptight in one area, you're frazzled everywhere. You choose. Relaxing helps you be present to whatever it is you do. Even a little rest goes a long way. That way your mind is not running all over the place. After relaxing, your mind doesn't insist that your body run all over the city. If you still need to, then your body will be more ready after relaxing.
4. Sidestep too much temptation. Know what you can handle and what you can't. If you know there are cookies in the house, you will likely be hungry for them. So, remove temptation if you know it is too much for you. That goes for drinking, eating, or doing too much. If you have a problem all year with these things, get professional help.
5. Follow your heart. Start now deciding what you will and won't do. Remember that stress adds pounds. Give up what does not work for you. If you love doing something, remember that you want to do it. Otherwise, it could devolve into a stressful "job."
6. Meditate. Rest. Relax.
7. Delegate. Believe it, or not, you do not have to do everything. Give others the gift of opportunity to do something, even if it isn't as good as you can do it.

8. Practice Extreme Self-Care, as author Cheryl Richardson would say. During the holidays, routines change. Plan now to see to it that you, and your loved ones for whom you're responsible, don't get off course. If you or your relative is on nighttime medicine, take the medicine to parties and set an alarm, so you remember. Most psychotropic medicines are taken in the morning, but there might be other night time medicines. Be vigilant with your health. Don't let routines be forgotten. Try not to go to bed late, two nights in a row. Make a list of what you have let slide in the past, so you find strategies to support yourself and your loved ones this year. Pay attention to your needs. You could be so distracted that you forget to notice when a cold is starting. Just make a pact with yourself and let your subconscious support you. That can work for many people, but if you haven't tried it before, you might not be able to count on it.

9. Get support for you from a friend, or professional.

10. Barter. Do an exchange. Ask a friend who likes to decorate to do your tree. Maybe you'll clean for her at another time. Go to a coach who will support you through the season. Consult your inner wisdom and consider what brings you magic. What makes your heart sing? Make a list and do what you can and no more. Give up obligation if it is killing your spirit. Know what tires you out. Do what works for you.

11. Chase away the blues. For those who lean to loneliness at holidays, you may want to donate money to charities, and/or work at a local charity. Give support. Volunteer. Enjoyment comes from simple pleasures, not necessarily *things*, as such. Spread your talents. It can be calming and rewarding if you have time and energy.

12. Connect more deeply. While doing what enriches your soul, do what encourages connection. Inquire into another's life and acknowledge their successes. Just being in the same space with people at holidays, does not mean connection.

13. Create the magic. Everyone has different interests and talents that can be used during this time. For example, my husband Ed sings. We're both good with words, so we create funny lyrics to old holiday songs, just for our enjoyment. We sing together, though my singing voice is horrid.

14. Focus on what each person does best. Talk to family members about what makes each one happy. If someone likes to cook, you may trade recipes and cook together. You might read poetry to each other. You might find little ways to make each other happy. You can do thoughtful things all year long. This is a good time to practice new acts of kindness.

Holidays can bring magic. Winter holidays all represent sacredness. Though there are 29 religious holiday celebrations in December, most have to do with one's inner light and are celebrated across multiple days. Hanukkah celebrates

the Festival of Lights for eight days. Winter Solstice marks nature's promise for the return of light on the darkest day. Kwanzaa, while not a religion, gives spiritual focus on inner light by highlighting seven principles. The Christian tradition is all about the Son Light born into the world. The symbolic meaning is that our light, our sacredness, yours and ours, is reborn when we recognize, honor, and act from that inner light/love.

What I want to leave you with is: You ARE the light. The holiday that you celebrate can increase your recognition of the light within. Whatever you do, and whatever you celebrate, do it in deLIGHT.



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