

You Can Survive the Winter Holidays

by Alyce Duckworth, LCSW

Supervisor, Prince St. Academy, Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network

December, 2008

Is it just me, or does it seem like Christmas and the winter holidays are coming earlier and earlier each year? Is it just me, or does anyone else out there feel a lot more like Scrooge before he is visited by the three ghosts than like George Bailey after he meets Clarence? Although the well-known Christmas carol says, "It's the most wonderful time of the year," I sometimes wonder how this is "the most wonderful time of the year" when everyone seems more stressed and many can't participate in the commercialistic "happiness" that has come to be expected this time of year.

The holiday season is typically a time to be spent celebrating with family and friends - "There's no place like home for the Holidays." However, the season also brings with it a great deal of added pressures, expectations, and subsequent guilt when those expectations are not met.

One need only think about the verses and carols that abound at this time to catch my meaning. "You will get a sentimental feeling when you hear voices singing 'let's be jolly, deck the halls with boughs of holly'," "Peace on Earth, Good will toward men," "The children were nestled all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads," the season is full of concepts such as these that appeal to the perfectionistic, idealistic, magical-thinking side of human beings. During the holiday season, we are bombarded with consumer messages that a picturesque and perfect holiday season is not only attainable, but can be bought at your local one-stop-shopping center. The pressures of pursuing perfection and commercialism become quite clear; increasing time, monetary, and emotional expenditures. I don't even know what a sugar plum is, but I get the message that, if I don't go out and buy several for my kids who are dreaming about them, the season will be a complete flop.

When "family time" is added to this mix, the dough gets quite sticky indeed. I remember thinking as a kid that Christmastime was a time of miracles, when any wish could come true. I don't think I'll be alone when I say, as an adult, I still harbor unrealistic expectations of the holiday season.

These expectations are bolstered and exacerbated by the message that happiness can be bought and wrapped. When past holiday family memories are marked with poverty, divorce, arguments, addiction, illness, grief/loss or any number of difficulties, many people hold onto hopes that things will be different with the family *this* holiday season. However, when the last piece of tinsel has been cleared away, the same disappointments with family issues are still there. Many people become trapped in the vicious holiday cycle of anticipation/preparation, build-up, let-down, guilt. Guilt often is the end result when a large amount of effort, money and emotion have been expended, but the final outcome is still disappointing (i.e., dad and uncle Bob still refused to talk to each other, no sugar plums were to be found in a 100-mile radius, and you were unable to exhibit good will toward ALL men).

In order to avoid getting trapped in a vicious cycle, it is necessary to resist the many messages equating joy and happiness with materialism. No amount of gifts or food can ever re-write history, create miracles, or make up for stress and unrealistic pressures. Extracting heartfelt meaning from the holiday motions, that often provoke stress and resentment, is the main way to combat a downward emotional cycle. I propose the following plan for creating your own holiday tradition and avoiding unnecessary seasonal trauma:

Call a family meeting to determine which aspects of the holidays cause stress and which are particularly meaningful to individual family members. For example, mom may hate baking Christmas cookies, but love spending time at the local senior center.

Create a plan incorporating all meaningful aspects and determining how stressful aspects will be altered or eliminated (e.g., maybe Christmas cookies can be purchased this year or a Christmas cookie baking/decorating party can be planned in order to ease mom's stress in this area). It may be important to your family that particular cultural or religious practices are included, or that shared family values (like the value of giving to others) are reflected in the new tradition.

Institute the plan that your family has outlined in the steps above as the new family holiday tradition. When others in the family begin to lose sight of this plan, gently remind them of the important aspects of the holiday celebration that were agreed upon together. During the sometimes stress-provoking holidays, it becomes more important than ever for the whole family to work as a team in order to decrease one another's stress and contribute to the overall enjoyment of the **true** reason, whatever you believe that to be, for the **season**.

© Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network, 2008

Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network offers comprehensive behavioral health services for adults, seniors, families and children.

- | | | | |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| • Counseling – Individual, Group, Family | • Substance Abuse Treatment | • Criminal Justice Services | Information, Initial Appointment 303 730 8858 |
| • Psychiatry | • Victim Services | • Clubhouse – Vocational/Social Rehab | Emergency & Crisis Intervention 303 730 3303 |
| • Case Management | • Adult Acute Treatment Unit | • Day Treatment Therapeutic School | Pharmacy 303 797 2500 |
| • Education & Wellness Programs | • Adult Supported & Residential Housing | • School-based Services | |