Surviving Holiday Madness

The holidays can be a time of great joy. Many of us envision sitting around a table giving thanks with loved ones or exchanging gifts with friends. However, for some people the holidays highlight dysfunctional family interactions and may amplify stress and sadness. This article is meant to aid readers in navigating difficult situations involving family members and in managing negative emotions that may arise during the holiday season.

Sometimes, a disagreement may occur between partners regarding where they will spend the holidays. Before the holidays begin, partners should get together and agree upon a plan as to how they will spend the holidays. This also applies to how co-parents share time with children if this is not already in a court order. For instance, the children will spend Thanksgiving with Partner A’s family and December/Spring holidays with Partner B’s family then they will switch the next year. Whatever plan you agree upon must be a win for both partners, not a compromise. When a couple compromises, typically one partner wins and the other loses, rather than both partners winning in the relationship.

Other times, difficult interactions with friends and loved ones are caused by unhealthy boundaries. An example of poor boundaries is not being able to say 'no' when requests are made by pushy relatives or friends. In order to give a convincing 'no', you should practice with a trusted friend, loved one or by yourself. This includes imagining or acting out the various arguments another person may give to encourage you to say 'yes'. Practice responding with a simple 'no' or “No, I won't be able to do that.” Do not apologize or say “I don't think I can do that'. Your answer must be assertive, not aggressive or passive.

You must also keep in mind the feelings of others and follow the Golden Rule of treating others how you want to be treated. This will help you respect the boundaries of other people. It is always best to stop, pause, and think before you speak or act. Using ‘I Statements’ may be helpful. ‘I feel (emotion[s]) when (circumstance) because (reason[s])’. It is important not to use ‘angry’ or ‘mad’ as your primary emotion because it typically masks a deeper emotion such as hurt or disrespect. It is also important not to use the word ‘you’ when describing the circumstances which upset you because it implies other people are in charge of your emotions.

Finally, conflict may occur due to unclear roles during the holidays. Perhaps, partner A buys all the gifts and cooks all the food and could potentially resent partner B. Both partners should come to a win-win solution and share in getting prepared for the holidays. Resist rescuing one another from completing tasks as this may help preserve individual autonomy and maintain previously agreed upon balance of obligations in the relationship. Another example of unclear roles comes from parents who expect children to act like parents and take upon parental roles during the holidays. Older children should not be expected to discipline or watch children throughout the break. This may rob the older child of some of the precious time of childhood.

Negative emotions such as anxiety and depression may be associated with people, memories, and situations from holidays past and may reappear when we least expect them. In order to combat such
emotions, it is important to utilize positive internal coping skills. Positive internal coping skills are activities a person can do by themselves that either soothes, distracts or causes them to feel the opposite emotion(s). For instance, one may take a bubble bath, read a book, or watch funny YouTube videos. We hope this guide aids you in having a joyous, fun and healthy holiday season.

**Tips for Surviving the Holidays**

1. Respectfully communicate with your partner about expectations for relatives who come to visit your home.
2. Be on the same page with parental expectations for your children when visiting with relatives.
3. Support one another.
4. Make sure to have a plan for your pets while you are away or when people are at your house.
5. Understand that many relatives will give you unsolicited advice and/or be rude about your parenting, cooking or household skills. Using phrases such as, “Thank you for your feedback,” or “I’m sorry you feel that way,” may very well end the conversation.
6. Cousins and friends of different ages should be supervised by parents; older children should not be expected to be responsible for younger children.
7. If at all possible, give older and younger children age appropriate activities to keep them occupied and give each age group time apart from the others.
8. It is also important to remember to spend at least 15 minutes of child-directed activity with each child every day.
9. For younger children especially, it is important to maintain a semblance of a schedule during a holiday with so many new faces. Try to stick to regular nap/bed and meal times.
10. Monitoring use of technology is very important during the holidays as children have a lot of time to themselves. Parents should be aware of what their children are watching on the computer, television, tablets and phones in order to ensure the safety of their kids.
11. It is important to advise parents of children visiting your home about your non-negotiable household rules.
12. If a child breaks the rules, simply acknowledge what you want them to do, "I see you really want to play ball in the house." Give them your rule, “We do not play ball in this house." Give them an equally exciting alternative, "You can take the ball outside and play."
13. Using catch phrases to stop yourself from getting in power struggles with kids and teenagers is a great tool. Memorize the following catch phrases and use them as appropriate, "I don't know. Could be. Maybe so. Nice try."
14. If you make a mistake, even with your children, show them how loved and respected they are by saying ‘I’m sorry for (what you did).’ If you made a mistake in front of everyone, apologize in front of everyone.
15. Remember, you will not be able to please everyone during the holidays. If you are acting with kindness, fairness and justice, you are doing what is best for you and your family.