

Getting Through Christmas When You Want to Hibernate Until January

With the Christmas season upon us, I find traditional images of the holidays are often too optimistic and too perfect. We see cozy, cheerful, tastefully decorated homes, surrounded by white, pristine snow, with happy, well-dressed families gathered around a table sharing a large dinner cooked to Instagram perfection.

Unfortunately, life can sometimes be so complex and messy that it's impossible to guarantee a picture perfect Christmas. And yet, every year, we still expect it. We work hard planning, baking, decorating, expecting a fun, pleasant, relaxing Christmas and end up with a chaotic and stressful one. Not to mention, all the expected cheer and merriment of the holidays can shine a spotlight on whatever stresses, losses, or other challenges we might be facing. For some of us, we would rather stay under the covers and wake up in January! It's extremely difficult to be going through a tough time when everything around us looks like a Hallmark movie. Though the instinct maybe to hibernate until it is over, it is not practical or healthy!

When I looked at my social circle, I realized there are many who are going through horrible, trying times: cancer, death of a child, divorce, bankruptcy, moving away from friends and family, and job loss. I inquired as to how they manage the season of "joy" when their situation seems anything but joyous. This is a summary of what I learned from them:

1. Have a "Survival Plan":
 - a) Give yourself permission to say no to any social event or expectation that you feel will drain you.
 - b) Gracefully back out of a commitment you made when you were feeling good, but then realized on the day of the event, you no longer have the stamina to attend.
 - c) Limit how much you are willing to participate in events. Perhaps you can attend for an hour, and leave early? Will you come to the potluck, but only bring store-bought items and rather than stressing out about bringing something homemade?
 - d) Create a code word with your significant other so that once you have reached your ability to cope, you can communicate your need to leave with your partner quickly and easily.
2. When going through dark times, our first inclination is to shut people out. That is the worst thing to do. Remember, you are not alone, so try to surround yourself with supportive friends and family.
3. Do not be afraid to invite someone who is grieving or has experienced a loss (even if the loss was years ago) to an event. Ask if you can pick them up and stay with them throughout the event for support. Bereaved parents, in particular, almost always struggle at Christmas time, even if it has been years since their child has passed. From the bereaved parents I know, this is what they tell me: Talk about their child, share your memories, say their child's name. Don't be afraid if they cry. It is like a balm to the grieving person's soul.
4. Do something different – go away or visit a different relative, or perhaps friends. By changing your routine you won't have the same memory triggers.

5. Don't push yourself beyond what you feel able to do. Stress, bereavement, tragedy sickness, it is all exhausting. Remember to get enough sleep and don't feel you have to do everything you used to. For example, email a Christmas message to friends instead of writing cards. They will understand.
6. Use the Christmas tree as a place to hang special mementoes, or photos or letters. You could also have a candle in a corner of a room to burn throughout Christmas, perhaps beside a special photo.
7. Buy yourself a gift from the loved one that you are grieving – something he or she would have wanted you to have.
8. Keep traditions. Or lose them. Give yourself permission to keep or toss whatever doesn't feel right this year. This doesn't mean you'll never take up those traditions again. But maybe a change of pace is necessary, if only for this season. And maybe, you'll find a new tradition that honors your loss that you will want to keep around for years to come.
9. Make self-care a priority. Take a break from social media, and the perceived "perfect" families and "perfect" Christmases. Nourish your body with nutritious food. Get outside, if even for a short walk or a breath of fresh air. Take a relaxing bath to de-stress. Schedule some time with your therapist so you have a safe person who can help you navigate ups and downs of the holidays. Escape in a good book, or a binge-worthy Netflix show. Wrap yourself in a warm blanket and cuddle with your pet.
10. Write a letter to the ones you missing this Christmas. Whatever it is that you wish you could have said to them — go ahead and say it. Even if they'll never have a chance to read it.
11. Allow yourself to feel all the feelings of the holidays - the good and the bad. Sometimes we think that because we are mourning, or we are going through a very difficult time, we should not laugh, smile or otherwise feel merry. But the truth is, we need to smile when we want to smile, and laugh when we find joy. The presence of joy does not take away the sadness we are also feeling. It merely indicates that we are indeed still alive, still human, still standing.

The holidays don't have to be perfect, families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to and be open to creating new ones. Stick to your budget so you do not create more stress. You can't buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Rather, donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange. If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, or any other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others can lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. You can make it through the Christmas season with generous self-compassion and kindness. Even during hard times, you have a choice about what you think and how you respond. My hope for you is that you will even discover some magical moments of joy this holiday season.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to encourage success in school. Tammy advocates for students and provides a link between the student and other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for nearly 20 years and is a mother to 4 children, 3 of whom are teenagers.

CHRISTMAS TO-DO-LIST

- ^{BE} ~~buy~~ presents
- wrap ~~gifts~~ ^{SOMEONE}
^{IN A HUG}
- Send ~~gifts~~ ^{PEACE}
- ^{DONATE} ~~shop~~ for food
- ^{BE} ~~See~~ the lights