

How to Cope with the Holidays and Family Issues

Jay Uhler

In spite of the social expectation that the holidays are a joy filled, happy time, the opposite is often true. Many people are either suffering from present day difficult times or losses or traumatic experiences from the past that intrude on the present. This is especially true during the holidays. When expectations conflict with the reality of the moment, that only adds to our upset.

Here are some thoughts about how to cope with this particular time in our lives. Section I of this outline highlights various reactions to the holidays. Section II suggests positive approaches to experience the holidays with your family or without a family, if you are alone or wherever you are.

Blessings, Peace and Love for the holidays!

I. People enter the holidays with the expectation that they should be exceptionally happy. The truth is that the opposite often occurs. The holidays are a difficult time for many people. They are a time of intense feelings and of stress.

Stress is a combination of unresolved emotions from the past, feelings in the present experience that are not addressed, pressure that we put on ourselves due to our own expectations or the expectations of others and outside circumstances that are beyond our control.

1. The myth of the holidays as a fun time.
 - A. A family member may have died in the past year or around the last holiday season. The deceased person is missed and there is much grief. It is especially excruciating when it is a child or a young husband and parent.
 - B. Separation, divorce or family splits may have occurred since the last holiday causing painful memories. (See the article, "How to Move Through the Loss of a Relationship" under the "Articles" tab at jayuhler.com.)
 - C. Family get-togethers bring into focus the unpleasant or painful dynamics that exist in the family
 - D. People who don't have a family to be with may feel lonely. They may blame themselves, believing that they are a failure or a bad person if they are alone for the holiday.
 - E. Painful or depressing feelings about previous holidays get stirred up without people realizing what is precipitating their present emotions. It is difficult to cope with feelings connected to the past when you believe that they are caused by the present situation.
2. A person can feel that they are crazy for having such intense feelings as may occur during the holidays. (See the book or unabridged CD, "*How to Make Friends With Your Feelings*.)
3. A person may feel sad that the holiday isn't as exciting as it was when they were a child. They feel the loss of that spontaneous joy. (See [The Most Precious Present](#) from "Jay's Jottings" Newspaper series at jayuhler.com)

Jay Uhler is an Organizational and Clinical Psychologist, a United Methodist Minister and the President of Catalyst World-WideSM. He provides individual, marital, family and sex therapies in North Andover and Quincy, MA USA. He consults with organizations on conflict resolution.

Jay is a Professional Speaker who includes humor and sometimes sings during his presentations. He is also a professional entertainer who uses stories, humor and songs.

4. Celebration is seen as a time for excess.
 - A. People eat, drink, and make merry (have affairs).
 - a. People eat more than usual and get sick both from how much they eat and from the sugar and chemical contents of their food that can make them tired and sometimes depressed for a day or two.
 - b. Excessive drinking occurs at company and family parties which lead to traffic deaths. (I believe that it is not only the alcohol, but the sugar content in alcoholic beverages, that cause people to fall asleep while driving and cause highway deaths. When people are already tired from staying at parties late at night and into the morning or from all the extra activities of holiday preparations and gift buying, you have a deadly combination..)
 - c. Alcoholic beverages at company parties, with reduced inhibitions/control, lead to sex which can cause later regrets or break up families and causes pain for the participants and their family members
5. Being without a job and/or financial concerns can weigh heavy on a person, couple or family and diminish the glitter of the holidays.

II. A holiday is just another day. It is not the last, best day of your life. It has a lot of hype and specialness attributed to it which can lead to disappointment when the day does not measure up to expectations.

1. **A holiday is what you make it to be.** A good holiday experience can be created by facing the truth of your own situation, venting your feelings in constructive ways, and making plans that meet your needs. This may or may not mean to be with your family of learning or extended family. It may mean to be with a "family" of friends that you create.
 - A. The holidays can be a time for the family to be closer by sharing grief. (See [Articles on Grief](#) from "Jay's Jottings" Newspaper series. A series of twelve brief articles on the grieving process at jayuhler.com)
 - a. Talk about the person who died:
 - i. Cry together
 - ii. Share personal feelings related to your grief
 - iii. Make emotional contact with each other
 - iv. Support each other
 - v. Hug and hold each other.
 - b. When you are with your family and everyone avoids sharing their grief, it leads to loneliness and isolation, which adds to the pain.
 - B. Separation and divorce surrounding the holidays are a very important topic and too extensive for this outline. (See the article, "How to Move Through the Loss of a Relationship" under the "Articles" tab at jayuhler.com.)
 - C. Be realistic about your contact with your family.
 - a. Accept your family as it is. To expect something different from the usual type of interaction, just because it is a holiday, will lead to disappointment and upset. Just knowing the truth about your family and interacting with a realistic perspective can be a relief.
 - b. If being with your extended family is upsetting, don't do it; go elsewhere. Be with friends or by yourself. There are ways to influence change in your family, but the holidays are not the time to try.

- c. If you are with your family and it's not what you need, entertain yourself by playing an analytical family game. No one else needs to know that you are doing it. Use the family time as an opportunity to learn about the influences your family has had on you by observing the present dynamics. (See the chapters, "The Hurtful, Frightening Family" and the "Helpful, Fun family" from the book or unabridged CD, *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings* by Jay Uhler. The book and CD are available on the "Book and CD" tab at jayuhler.com.)
- D. If you live alone or cannot be with your family, take good care of yourself. Be sure to meet your own needs.
 - a. Before the holiday arrives, make arrangements for, or at least decide, what you would enjoy doing.
 - b. Create your own family by getting together with other people who don't have or can't be with their family.
 - c. If you are alone with no plans, definitely avoid beating up on yourself about it with anger toward yourself, dumping guilt on yourself or self-abusive thoughts. Self-rejection is the most painful of pains. It serves no purpose and only adds to any misery that already exists.
 - d. **Avoid making yourself suffer about what you are *NOT* doing. Make the best of what you *ARE* doing.**
- E. If you are having intense feelings, talk with a caring person about them. It can bring perspective and you can get understanding and support. If you have no one to talk to or find it is easier, write down your thoughts and feelings. It is called "Journaling."
2. Feelings mean that you are human and alive, not that you are crazy. Embrace the feelings and life. Confront the feelings and experience the relief of constructively venting them.
3. If you miss your childhood holiday experiences, share the loss and sadness with friends or co-workers. If they are understanding people, you will feel better and your sharing may give them permission to experience the latent child in themselves. They may want to join you in creating a child-like, fun holiday. (For a perspective on the holidays, see "Jay's Jottings," [The Most Precious Present](#) from "Jay's Jottings" Newspaper series.)
4. Buy gifts that you can afford. Extravagant gifts do not necessarily make happiness or express love. ((For a perspective on the holidays, see "Jay's Jottings," "The Most Precious Present" at the Articles tab on jayuhler.com.)
 - A. It is not loving to others or to yourself to place a financial burden on yourself in an attempt to show love.
 - B. Give yourself as an open, affectionate, caring person. That is the most pleasing holiday gift.
5. Enjoy the holidays by enjoying people rather than excessive eating foods and drinking beverages with sugar and alcohol that depress your immune system and lead to illness. Avoid actions that lead to pain and guilt for yourself and others.
6. Give yourself the gift of a clear mind and body. Do exercises that can reduce your stress. Choose joy over misery. Treat yourself and others with respect and kindness.
7. **Think often of my favorite phrase, "Caring is Contagious!"** Take care of yourself and others.

© Copyright, Jay Uhler, 2009

(This information may be copied, as is when used to benefit people)

To learn more about emotions, see the book and unabridged CD, *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings* by Jay Uhler. To order call: 1-800-bookjay (1-800-266-5529), go to a bookstore, the internet or order through jayuhler.com

For more on grieving when someone has died, go to jayuhler.com, click on the “Articles” tab on the left, then select [Articles on Grief](#)