

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Expectation-Proof Your Holidays**

Look out! The holidays are upon us! What are you experiencing as the stores deck out in red, green, and ads? Are you counting the days till you get to see people you miss and engage in meaningful, magical traditions? Are you ready to smack the first person who rings the Salvation Army bell or says “Happy Holidays” and then find a hole to hide in until January 2? Perhaps you are simply dealing with the urgencies of daily life, not stopping to feel anything in particular.

What a lot of pressure there is from our culture to have ideal experiences around the holidays! We're slammed with nasty weather, challenged budgets, skyrocketing airfares, jam-packed schedules, and relatives we would *never* have chosen for our family tree. But somehow we are still supposed to experience close, non-conflictual relationships with everyone present for the important days; top notch cuisine *exactly* as grandma used to make, if not better; beautiful décor; gifts that are extravagant and “exactly what they wanted”; magical, kid-like wonder; unique, selfie-worthy New Year's Eve celebrations; and hope for a glorious new year of joy and fulfilled resolutions. Whether this pressure comes from the media, others we know, or ourselves, there are three emotional expectation traps we tend to fall into during this season.

#### **Isn't it So Magical? The Positive Expectation Trap**

Those of us who have at least a few good things going this season can find our expectations expanding toward positive extremes. We remember childhood times where that toy we never thought we would get somehow made it into our possession. That deep, surprised delight was so sweet that we've been hoping to have that same bright intensity ever sense. Or we hope that the holiday magic the movies portray might soften estranged relationships or begin new ones that would heal some painful tension or loneliness. We may hope to soak up every moment with someone we only get to see at the holidays and somehow make those few days or hours stretch out to sustain us a long time and make up for too much time apart.

The problem with such positive, dreamy expectations is that the odds are rather low that the stars would align just right to make *this* holiday season the one that returns us to childlike wonder and surprise, heals our heart wounds, and buffers us against the pain of separation. As our hope for such thing inflates, we are likely to find disappointment.

#### **Bah Humbug! The Negative Expectation Trap**

On the opposite extreme, there are those of us who have been disappointed by the holidays again and again. Having been burned before, we have lowered our expectations of what is coming to the point of pervasive dread. Prophets of doom and gloom, we predict: “I'll be the only one alone at the holidays, yet again; if I do see people, they'll all just be thinking about what a loser I am; my wants won't be considered; I'll be utterly overwhelmed by the busyness; anything I do for others will be a disappointment; I'm not going to be able to think about anything other than my past losses around this time of year; etc.”

The problem here is that those very thoughts are so depressing that they tend to narrow our ability to perceive anything that comes our way that is an exception to that negative litany. With that mindset, it's very hard to let ourselves be pleasantly surprised or notice a joy or two thrown our way.

## **Whatever... I've Got Stuff to Do. The Apathy Trap**

Okay, so if positive expectations set us up for disappointment and negative ones keep us in disappointment, what kind of mindset can offer some protection for the curve balls the holidays throw us? Are we just supposed to say in some neutral place of numbness or apathy, going through the motions of what needs to get done and not allowing ourselves to have highs or lows?

That's exactly what some of us do. We see November and December as one giant to do list and we don't take the time to feel or think anything in particular about our connections with others or celebration events. In doing so, we blow right past the moments of joy on the way to do the laundry. We also miss important messages that negative emotions may be trying to send our way. If we actually let ourselves feel our fear, sadness, or anger, we might be able to tune in to changes that they are asking us to make that could lead us to greater vitality, growth, and joy.

## **Wisdom from Holiday Origin Stories**

So what should we do? If we look past what our holidays have become and consider the circumstances in which they began, what we find is not idealization, cynicism, or apathy. We find that they began in gratitude for joy that came up in surprising ways against a backdrop of intense, often prolonged suffering. We find emotional extremes living right there side by side.

Take Thanksgiving for starters. If we're talking about Plymouth Plantation in 1621, we've got about 50 folks left of the 100 who traveled thousands of miles to be able to have some religious freedom. They didn't have enough supplies and were not going to make it (suffering). But the Native Americans took pity on them and helped them out with some supplies and planting techniques. So they had a successful harvest so they didn't die (surprising joy). Grateful, they had a feast.

If we trace Thanksgiving back to when it became a national holiday in 1863, we find the country in the middle of the horrible, bloody Civil War (suffering). Grateful that 1) no other nation had declared war on the States during these vulnerable years; and that, 2) aside from the battles associated with the war, anarchy did not ensue in the general populace so that those who weren't soldiers were able to keep harvesting, reproducing, and pursuing industry (surprising joy), President Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday.

Hanukkah celebrates the Jews' gratitude for a military victory and a miracle. In 167 BCE Antiochus IV Epiphanes slaughtered Jews who were opposed to his reign and desecrated their temple, preventing them from worshipping as they'd been commanded to do (suffering). The Maccabee family led a successful revolt over the course of two years and finally triumphed, reestablishing worship in the temple. Though the rededication of the temple required a lamp to burn consecrated oil for eight nights, there was only enough oil for one night. Miraculously, the insufficient oil lasted all eight nights (surprising joy).

Christmas celebrates that, after the Jewish people had made mistakes that disconnected them from God, after they'd been oppressed and exiled for hundreds of years by various regimes, and after they felt long forgotten by God (suffering), God fulfilled His promises to them by Himself being born as Jesus, a human being. Jesus would grow up to be 1) a priest who could bring Jews and non-Jews into restored loving relationship with God and 2) a Messiah King who could not be defeated by mortal regimes, the failings and offenses of human nature, or even death (surprising joy).

Even our now profoundly commercialized and infantilized Santa got his start as the wealthy orphan St. Nicolas who gave his entire inheritance to the poor, sick, and suffering in the third century. The stalking-stuffing business commemorates a time that he had compassion on three sisters who were destined to become slaves because they lacked the money they needed to attract husbands to marry and care for them (suffering). Good 'ol St. Nick anonymously left gold in the socks they left out to dry to allow them to get married (surprising joy).

The folks who began the celebrations we honor during our the end of the year holidays understood something that we often miss: that incredible suffering continues to persist, but that right in the middle of it, there are surprising joys to be discovered and celebrated. When we can hold on to *both* of these expectations, we are living in what is *real*. And when we accept what is real, that gives us a degree of protection against the three holiday temptations: to idealize and then suffer disappointment, to see only the negative and miss joys that pop up in surprising ways, and to apathetically go through the motions of the holidays without feeling, just moving from one hectic task to another.

## **Living in Reality this Holiday Season: Some Things to Try**

If you would like to get some freedom from the extremes of holiday expectations, here are some things to try:

1. Set aside a bit of time to write out what expectations you have for the holidays in general, and this year in particular, both positive and negative.
2. Based on your list, consider whether you are most tempted to idealize, become cynical, or numbly go through the motions.
3. If you are largely prone to idealization, for each expectation ask yourself: What circumstantial and relational difficulties and tensions may I be underestimating? If these things get in the way of what I am hoping will happen, what can I still find to be joyful in these relationships or circumstances?
4. If you are prone to cynicism, challenge yourself to find at least three things each day of the holiday season that you can be grateful for, that surprised you in a positive way, or that were not quite as bad as you expected.
5. If you tend to numb out and just go through the motions, see if you can keep track daily or weekly of which things about the holidays were really hard for you or others, and which were good that had some genuine joy about them.

Let your goal for this holiday to be present in what is real, allowing yourself to clearly see both the suffering and the joy, as life can never help but be, not an average of the extremes, but a side-by-side assortment of them. Wishing you the freedom of finding what is real this holiday season and always!

If you or someone you know needs some help with managing expectations or overcoming holiday challenges, call me at 303-931-4284 or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com) for a free 20 minute consultation to see if I'd be a good fit for helping the recovery process.

To read past newsletters, go to [www.jenniferdiebel.com/Helpful Resources.html](http://www.jenniferdiebel.com/Helpful_Resources.html).

Thanks for reading!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC  
Licensed Professional Counselor

303-931-4284  
[info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com)  
[www.jenniferdiebel.com](http://www.jenniferdiebel.com)  
5370 Manhattan Circle, Suite 203  
Boulder, CO 80303

**Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC** is a Licensed Professional Counselor who works with individuals and couples in her private practice in Boulder, Colorado. For more information about her areas of expertise, background, and methods, as well as additional helpful resources and past newsletters, go to [www.jenniferdiebel.com](http://www.jenniferdiebel.com).

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