

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Mind Games for the Holidays

Since 'tis the season for sending out cards with quotes on the front that really capture the holiday spirit, I nominate the following quote for this season's card. I think it really nails it.

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...**

I suppose it may be a bit cynical to attribute to the holidays what Dickens said of the French Revolution. But isn't this closer to our experience than something that captures only one side of the season's sentiment: Happy Holidays or Bah Humbug?

After all, it's the season where we look around with deep gratitude at our friends and family, or kinda wish they would go away. It's the season where we give graciously out of the bounty we've received *and* wonder if we can satisfy that coworker we don't like with something under \$10. It's the season where couples sip eggnog in front of the fire and singles get to be the 3rd wheel, the 5th, the 7th, sitting at the end of the table as a reminder that once again, they're not coupled. It's a magnifying glass season. Whatever happiness or sadness, joy or loss that has been lurking in the background comes into HD clarity, paving the way for celebration, despair, or resolutions for change on the other side.

Holidays: The Extreme Sport

How do we handle such confusion? There are lots of ways, many of them extreme. We might go all out, putting out 40 boxes of decorations and buying presents for every person whose name we know. Or we boycott the whole thing, avoiding parties, turning off the phone ringer, vacationing to places where no one knows we're exhausted or miserable. We drink too much. We stay so busy with work or helping others that there's no down time to feel hurt or disappointment. We write extended holiday letters informing the people in our lives about just how happy and perfect we are, carefully editing out the ugly breaks and failures that occurred along the way.

But like trite holiday cards, extreme coping strategies don't honor the full truth that this season is a mix of good and bad, just like so many other seasons of life. And whatever side of the emotional spectrum we've been avoiding—joy or heartache—keeps knocking at our door, asking us to let in whatever we are forbidding ourselves or numbing during this time.

So in answer to the mixed-up-ness of this season, this year I'm selling two Holiday Mind Games to help us through, one fold for the good stuff and one for the bad.

Expanding Our Joy Tolerance

Brain researchers have found that our brains dedicate increasingly greater energy and space (numbers of neurons and strength of neural connections) to whatever emotions we spend the

most time on. Whatever feelings we focus on tend to grow and get more and more of our time and attention. That's why it's not a good idea to repeat or vent anger over and over—it just keeps getting bigger! On the positive side, this brain trick can give us a certain amount of power to increase our ability to feel good. By intentionally dwelling on whatever good *does* occur in our lives this season, even if this is our hardest holiday season yet, we can expand our current capacity to take in joy and stay in joy longer than we could if we simply let the sadness or frustration have all of our attention.

This season, by dedicating some time each day to listing those things that we are grateful for or that brought us joy that day, we can increase our attention to any good things that do come along and expand our ability to feel good more often. Plus, *anyone* can do it! See:

- I'm grateful that I'm still breathing.
- I'm glad I have one fewer day in prison.
- I am glad my son who is overseas this holiday at least sent me a card.
- The sunrise was beautiful this morning.
- It only took me 5 minutes to find a parking place at the insane mall.
- At least Aunt Maude only burned the potatoes this year, not the stuffing as well.

Shifting our attention daily to whatever is good, even in a hard situation, or to the sheer abundance of good in a great situation trains our minds to step back from negative thought ruts and make room for the good in the mix.

“Depression, I’ll Be with You in a Minute!”

Now before you accuse me of going all “Pollyanna” on you with the Glad Game, let me also tell you about the Containment Game. This one's for sadness, anger, disappointment, loneliness, dread—all the yucky stuff.

Basically, these emotions are here for a reason. Their job is to tell us that something's not right. And until we stop and let them have their say, they're gonna keep stalking us till we do. If we keep busy or numb, always shutting them up, we are adding *the fear of feeling the emotion* to the intensity of the emotion itself. Fear is like Miracle Grow. It makes other negative emotions grow larger. So to get the emotions back down to their actual size, we need to appease them by really hearing the message they are sending, while not letting them take over the whole season and cut us off from any joy that comes our way.

We can do this by scheduling a limited time to really feel any emotions we've been dodging. Maybe 15 minutes once a day, one hour every other day, two hours once a week, or whatever works. During that time, we might journal about the feeling, lock ourselves in the bathroom and scream about it, call someone to talk about it, buy some cheap-o plates and drop them while thinking about it—whatever! How we choose to enter the feeling is not as important as the choice to really feel it.

Choosing to feel what we've been avoiding, but for a limited amount of time, lets us know that we can be in the feeling we've been avoiding and it won't suck us into The Eternal Vortex of Misery. Going in for awhile and then out again over and over gradually decreases our fear of the feeling so that it does not get to stalk us *all* of the time and take over *all* of our holiday experiences. It's like we're telling the part of our brain whose job it is to let us know we need to mourn or scream: “I hear that you're hurting and I will be mad and sad with you tomorrow from

9-9:30. But right now, I'm focusing on this good experience and the people I am with right now. It's okay. You can wait."

Disciplining our minds to express emotion and to contain it, or to attend to good things that we normally miss in our hurt or frustration is not easy! But neither are the holidays! These "mind games" are like time we spend doing pull ups in the gym so that when we fall out of the raft, we can pull ourselves back in and not drown. Even though setting aside time for these things is downright annoying, it can be the difference between an awful holiday season and an okay one, or an okay one and a great one.

If you or someone you know would like some help navigating the holidays or the new year, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

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*Opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859).

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