

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Holiday Survival Guide

Though I have yet to meet any of you, I am sure that there must be some of you out there whose holiday memories actually do resemble a Courrier and Ives painting. Meanwhile, others of you blow the dust off your photo albums to reveal holidays that were, in fact, authored by Stephen King—his most terrifying series yet. And between those poles are the rest of us whose holidays might be categorized as the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Since it is still several weeks before the winter holidays get under way, I've written some holiday survival tips for the rest of us, in hopes that we might prepare to enjoy the Good holidays, even if they're not great, squeeze some good out of the Bad ones, and avoid being re-traumatized by the Ugly ones.

Enjoying the Good That's Not Great

Those of us with Good holidays get to be with relatives or friends that we more or less get along with, do activities that are more or less pleasurable, and eat food that is more or less palatable, even if we inevitably regret eating so much along the way. What makes our holidays good rather than great is comparison. We compare our current experiences with past memories of holidays that really did seem great—when we received the present we really, really wanted and played with it all day long; when the whole family was able to make it home and cuddle around the fire in the great blizzard of '73; when there was a familiar home in a familiar place to gather; or when the turkey was perfectly moist and Uncle Bart brought his prize-winning apple pie.

We may also compare our current holiday experience with what we had hoped would be the “perfect” holiday experience, where our family or friends finally got it all right after years of less-than-perfect attempts. Buckling under the weight of comparison to idealized past experiences and hopes of the perfect future holiday season that redeems all the others, our ordinary, some-good-and-some-not-so-good holiday experiences can't help but disappoint.

So to prevent Good holidays from being spoiled by impossible comparisons, here are some things to try:

- Identify the things that you most loved about past holidays and the ways that the upcoming holiday season will probably be different than those past memories.
- Identify the things about this coming holiday that you are hoping will be “just right” and then note any hopes that probably won't be feasible, given current circumstances and relationships.
- Take some time—maybe half an hour, an evening, or a weekend—*before* this holiday season begins to let yourself feel the disappointment that these holidays can't measure up to past memories and probably won't be just right. If letting yourself feel the disappointment brings up other life disappointments, let yourself grieve those too. The grieving won't last forever and by letting yourself feel some of the sadness before, you can reduce the amount of grieving you'll need to do during or right after holiday events.

- Identify the relationships, rituals, food, and other experiences that are most meaningful to you during the holiday season. Figure out which of these are feasible to include in this season and schedule them in advance so that they don't get lost in the busyness.
- In advance of meaningful events, communicate to involved family or friends what feels important to you about each event so that, if possible, they can work with you to help the events go well enough to feel meaningful.
- At the end of the season, note what went well and what you might like to be different about next year. If making next year different requires advanced planning, write reminders on next year's calendar sufficiently in advance of the holiday season.

Finding Some Good in the Bad

Those of us who are expecting Bad holidays won't get to be with family or friends this season. Perhaps we can't make it home because of a work schedule, a budget shortfall, a lingering conflict, or the loss of a loved one. We expect the "holidays" to involve a TV dinner and MASH reruns, a night shift, or several hours in a nursing home. Odds are that things could get pretty depressing.

To squeeze some good out of a Bad holiday season, here are some things to try:

- If you are missing a holiday because of work, schedule a meal, meaningful activity, or a flight home sometime around the time of the holiday you had to miss, inviting friends to celebrate a second Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, or New Years with you.
- If you are alone and not occupied on a holiday, prepare a full day schedule for yourself in advance, filled with things that you love to do: catch up on good movies, eat your favorite food, conquer a new video game, call a long list of folks, hike, ski, etc. Though you might want to schedule some time to feel your disappointment before the holiday, don't give yourself much time on the day itself. Fill the day with things to look forward to.
- If you are separated from friends or family because of conflict or loss, write out a detailed plan for ways that you could make progress on the conflict or for developing new, healthy relationships in advance of next year's holiday season. The plan might include phone calls, family or individual therapy, new activities, social skills training or self help books, online dating or friendship, etc. You may find that you start to feel better as soon as you make a plan, not when the plan is completed.
- If you are hurting from the loss of a loved one and there is no one else with whom you can spend the holidays, contact local volunteer organizations or churches that help people around the holidays. Staying active and helping others can give you a break from grieving on those important days when grief can be the most difficult.

Surviving the Ugly

Those of us who experience Ugly holidays can expect to call the police at some point during the weekend because Cousin Charles has thrown the Thanksgiving turkey through the plate glass window...again. Holidays feel like prison sentences in which we must spend what feels like an eternity with people who have abused us in the past and just might do it again, or who might turn the abuse on our kids if we leave them unattended even for a moment. For those of us with Ugly holidays, the goal is to make it to January 2nd without incurring any new physical, emotional, or relational injuries.

If this sounds like your family, first of all, you deserve a good pat on the back for all you've survived already! And here are some suggestions for minimizing the holiday damage:

- If you feel that there is a good chance that you or your family might be hurt in ways that you cannot prevent, don't go! You might need to ask some friends or trusted family to support you as you work through the "guilt" of not going. You might also ask them to give you another place to go for the holidays. But if it's bound to hurt, just don't do it!
- If the event will be unpleasant, but you know that you will be able to protect yourself and your family sufficiently to avoid further harm, give yourself a wide variety of escape strategies. Spring for the rental car rather than accepting a ride that will trap you in a place you can't leave. Schedule a phone call, a walk, a convenience store visit, or a meeting with a nearby friend during part of the day to give yourself several breaks. Go to the bathroom often and, while there, read encouraging quotes, mantras, scriptures, or notes from friends to remind yourself of who you are and how loved you are. Schedule business conferences or meetings near the holidays to reduce the amount of time you can stay away. Go home early if you need to.
- In advance of difficult events, let your friends, trusted family, or a good therapist know about what you will be facing and provide them with specific suggestions of how they might support you. You might ask them to call you during the event, write a letter of encouragement you could take with you, provide you with an excuse to leave if needed, or give you sound advice when you feel like you can't trust yourself to make sure you are taken care of.

If you or someone you know would like some help preparing for the holidays or dealing with seasonal depression, *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, NCC
Psychotherapist

303-931-4284
info@jenniferdiebel.com
www.jenniferdiebel.com
3393 Iris Avenue, Suite 104
Boulder, CO 80301

Jennifer Diebel, MA, NCC is a psychotherapist who works with adolescents, adults, couples, and families 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.

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