



How to Put “Happy” Back in the Holidays

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Professional Clinical Counselor

Instructions

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Introduction

Holidays can represent emotional triggers for clients. No matter the season or specific day, holidays are designed to celebrate something positive: love, family, fun, traditions, religious and/or historic significance. Add to each day or season social expectations, advertising and other emotional triggers like special foods, costumes and music.

But, all these same descriptions can be devastating to someone who is lonely, financially stressed, grieving, experiencing family or relationship conflicts, struggles with eating disorders, depression, anxiety, or alcohol abuse. Then, holidays become something to endure or avoid. Clients might even have a long history of disliking a particular holiday due to childhood experiences.

Clinicians can't erase holidays, but you can help clients create new meanings and traditions associated with a given holiday. This course will explore holiday stressors and healthy ways for clients to cope.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Explore emotional triggers associated with holidays
2. Respond to unwanted social and family expectations
3. Develop healthy coping strategies for painful holidays

Let's Get Started!

Holidays as Emotional Triggers

What is your favorite holiday? Think of all the things that make it special to you. What positive memories do you recall? Now, do the same with your least favorite holiday. What don't you like about it? What negative memories do you recall about this holiday? Finally, what holidays are meaningless to you? You treat them just like any other day. Why don't you attach strong feelings to these holidays?

Holidays are just dates on the calendar like birthdays and anniversaries that we've chosen to give significance. The actual date only has the meaning you give it. That's why the answers to the above questions will be different for everyone. But, unlike a birthday or anniversary, other people celebrate holidays too. So, unhappy times can feel magnified because it appears that "everyone else is happy."

For many clients, holidays are triggers for painful memories and emotions. It could be for a short time as someone navigates life changes, or it could represent a lifelong struggle. Let's look at a few common scenarios:

- *Grief:* When someone dies, holidays can become especially sad. Every special day is another reminder that a loved one is not there. Every holiday in the first year following a death can feel like a reopening of wounds, because it's another "first." Sometimes friends and family members express feeling guilty for enjoying a holiday without their loved one present.
- *Relationship conflict:* Holidays are often associated with family or being in a romantic relationship, rather than being alone. So, recent break ups, divorce, or family dysfunction can be especially hard. In the case of large families, divorced and stepfamilies, there's often pressure to visit everyone in a short timeframe. Couples may report conflict or resentment about which side of the family to visit for which holiday and how much money, if any, to spend on gifts.
- *Financial instability:* When holidays involve expectations of gifts, food, travel or parties, some clients can experience increased financial stress. Often purchases have not been budgeted so impulsive spending leads to deeper debt. The ramifications of extra credit card purchases are felt in the months following a holiday, extending the stress.
- *Depression:* For people struggling with depression, holidays can represent glaring differences between themselves and others who appear "happy." This can increase feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Winter holidays can be especially difficult for those experiencing seasonal affective disorder, as the change in weather to shorter, darker days is already hard.
- *Eating disorder:* Name any holiday and there is probably a favorite or traditional food associated with the celebration. For someone who struggles with an eating disorder, the exposure to food can be overwhelming. Food choices and quantities are more vulnerable to public scrutiny when gatherings are centered on food.
- *Alcohol abuse:* Similar to an emphasis on food, many holiday parties involve alcohol. Clients experiencing current or past alcohol dependence can be tempted to overindulge, especially if overdrinking has been normalized as acceptable as part of the holiday.

Managing Expectations

The wider the gap is between expectations and reality, the deeper the disappointment. When it comes to expectations for holidays, many are unrealistic. There are three sets of expectations to manage: personal, family and societal. Let's start by exploring societal expectations first, which can be the most pervasive, yet uncontrollable.

Societal Expectations

First, consider school and work vacation calendars that are designed around certain holidays that “everyone” is assumed to celebrate. Businesses and services are collectively closed on certain days. The cultural expectation is that you are supposed to have plans.

Another major source of what a holiday is “supposed” to be is set by the world of advertising. It’s hard to escape ads on TV, radio, print and online. Holiday merchandise is promoted on store shelves for weeks (and sometimes months) in advance. Overall, the message is, “If you buy or do this, you’ll be happier!” The underlying message is, “Everyone else is buying or doing this, so you should too.” Of course, all advertising shows people who are extremely attractive. They have even more attractive partners, children and friends, who are all laughing joyously. Miraculously, they appear to have no stress, lots of extra time, and endless amounts of money to afford the advertised product.

Contributing to the temptation to focus on what “everyone else is doing,” is social media. Consider when people most often turn to social media – it’s usually when they’re feeling bored or lonely. Now consider when people *post* on social media – it’s usually when they have something fun or happy to share. It’s not hard to see why comparing regular life with other’s highlight reels can result in feeling inferior.

This has created a new phenomenon known as, “fear of missing out” or F.O.M.O. Seeing what everyone else is doing that you’re not can cause some clients to feel like no matter what they do, it’s not enough. F.O.M.O. erodes the pleasure of any pursuit or activity by reducing it to something to check off a list versus truly experiencing.

Personal Expectations

Clients often set unrealistic expectations for themselves for holidays, resulting in unnecessary pressure and stress. Goals of having the “perfect holiday” rarely materialize. That’s because reaching perfection usually means other people must behave in a certain way. Odds are that if someone is difficult 364 days out of the year, he or she will be difficult on any given holiday too. Yet, some clients are so blinded by the desire to have a “perfect day” they mistakenly assume the holiday will change everything.

Some people create a holiday to-do list that realistically would take a full year to accomplish and fund and attempt to squeeze it into a few short weeks. When they can only achieve a small portion of their self-imposed goals, they report feeling like a failure. For clients who base their self-worth on external validation, holidays represent stages on which to perform. Therefore, perfectionism can strip a holiday of joy when it leaves you over-tired, over-budget and feeling under appreciated.

Family and Friend Expectations

It can be very stressful to balance personal needs with family demands, especially if relationships are dysfunctional. Clients often report experiencing guilt for not wanting to spend time with family members who have hurt them in the past. For example, it can be hard to reconcile spending Mother's or Father's Day with a parent who has been abusive in the past and the relationship is not healed.

Divorced parents can put pressure on children far into adulthood in regards to how time is split during holidays. Even siblings and extended family may express disappointment if one member chooses not to attend a holiday function. There can be financial pressure as well if the holiday involves gifts, but not everyone agrees or can afford the same budget.

Couples may have opposing ideas of how to celebrate holidays, based on their own childhoods. This could range from differences in traditions, foods, finances, who to spend the holiday with, and significance of the day. Without healthy conflict resolution, one or both partners can end up feeling resentful.

Friends and acquaintances can be just as demanding. Miss your best friend's party and you might feel the negative repercussions for months to come. The difficulty with friends, neighbors or co-workers is that you can't avoid them for too long. You may or may not see family daily, but you are guaranteed to run into your co-worker Monday morning. At the very least, these are the people who will ask you what you did for the holiday. If it was an unpleasant experience, it can be a difficult conversation.

What Does It Mean to Be Happy?

Helping clients cope with difficult holidays starts by challenging them to define (and perhaps *re-define*) what it means to be happy. In the same way people give holidays meaning, people assign their own meaning to words. One person's definition of happiness can vary quite a bit from another's. Explore with clients what happiness means to them. What's required? You may discover definitions that are vague or ones that are dependent on uncontrollable circumstances.

If happiness seems like such a pleasant state, why does its pursuit cause people so much pain? When a client's definition of happiness is based on unrealistic expectations, he or she will experience disappointment. Here are some suggested research findings regarding happiness. Use this information to inform or expand a client's definition:

- *Happiness is not a permanent state.* Happiness is a feeling and like all feelings, it fluctuates. Happiness is also not the appropriate response to every situation, so it would be unhealthy to strive for happiness at all times. Teaching clients the reality that happiness comes and goes will relieve them of the pressure to appear or strive for an unnatural constant state.

- *Happiness is circumstantial.* One of the main reasons that happiness fluctuates is because it's based on circumstances. If the traffic light is green, you might be happy that you'll be on time. But, if the same light is red, you might be frustrated because now you'll be late. Positive circumstances make you happy, but adversity does not.
- *Constant happiness can increase conflict.* It may seem that being happy all the time would save you from conflict, but the opposite is true. Seeking a constant state of happiness may cause people to avoid dealing with real problems that need attention. Bills can pile up to debt, a few extra pounds can add up to diabetes, unresolved conflict can add up to broken relationships.
- *Happiness is relative to unhappiness.* Feelings can only be defined in context and relation to other feelings. How do you really know that you're happy? If you're happy all the time, then how do you know to call that happiness? You know because there have been times of sadness, pain, depression, jealousy, irritation, etc. The more a client is willing to experience uncomfortable emotions, the more he or she will know how to personally define happiness. Resilient clients who have reported experiencing the deepest pain are the same ones who report knowing the deepest state of happiness, once they've recovered.
- *Happiness is in the process, not outcome.* Some people assume they have to cross a finish line to feel happy such as earning a certain amount of money, weighing a certain amount, or receiving a promotion. But, often people report feeling empty after achieving, winning, gaining, purchasing, or experiencing the thing they thought would bring them happiness. If enjoyment isn't found in the pursuit, it won't be found in the result. Therefore, the goal is not the pursuit of happiness, but the happiness of pursuit.

Shift the Goal

To help clients move in a new direction, ask them what it would be like to shift the goal of being happy during the holidays to a different feeling. Here are some examples:

- Content
- Satisfied
- Peaceful
- Grateful

Encourage clients to define each feeling and how it differs from happiness. Probe further by asking for personal examples. A helpful exercise to assign between counseling sessions is to ask clients to notice and document in a journal *moments* when these feelings were experienced during the week. Using the word "moments" underscores the reality that they won't feel this way all the time just as they won't feel happy (or sad) all the time.

For example, it's possible to experience contentment in a portion of one's life, day, or holiday while feeling dissatisfied in other parts. The goal is to recognize the positive feelings, however brief, without discounting them. This emphasis also helps guard against all-or-nothing thinking. This is when a client describes life with phrases like "always," "never," "no one," and "everyone." These are extreme descriptions that are rarely true.

Be sure and challenge statements like, "I never have any peace because everyone always wants something from me all the time!" It might be more accurate to say, "I experience peace sometimes and would like more of those moments. I get irritated when my kids call me and ask for money. That happens at least once a week."

Focus on What is Controllable

Recognizing positive feelings will be easier when clients focus only on what is controllable. What you focus on expands so by focusing on people or circumstances that you can't control, anxiety, pain and frustration are expanding too.

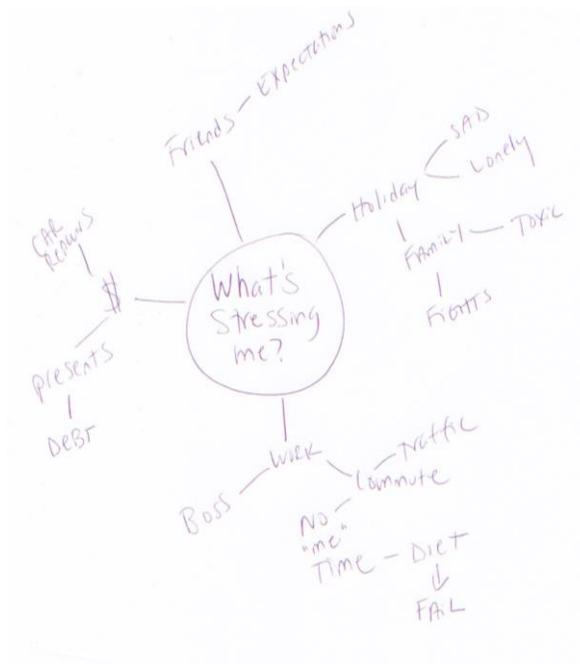
Remind clients that the only things within their control are their thoughts and responses. That's it. Accepting how little you have control over invokes anxiety for some, yet it can be freeing as well. Imagine the impact of redirecting all the energy you put into worrying about things you cannot affect and investing it into areas where you can make significant change. Rather than feeling stuck and helpless, you'll feel energized by positive movement.

Exercise: Create a Mind Map

To help clients identify what they control, have them draw a mind map. Give them a blank piece of paper and pen and these initial instructions:

1. In the center of the page, write down a question or topic you'd like to explore and circle it.
2. Without editing, write down any idea that comes to mind on that topic by creating stems. As more thoughts flow, keep adding stems.

Here's an example:



- Now consider each item. Cross out anything you don't control and circle what you do. If there are portions of something you control, but not the whole thing, create another stem from that item and circle only that part. Focus only on what is circled.

Mind maps can be used to explore solutions as well. Consider posing these questions:

- How can I take better care of myself?
- What am I grateful for?
- How can I make this holiday more enjoyable?
- How can I begin to manage my stress?

Reclaiming the Holiday: Practical Survival Tips

Once a client has established a realistic goal for the holiday and is focused only on choices within his or her control, then steps can be taken to make it more enjoyable. Here are 8 practical tips:

- *Clarify values.* This is an opportune time for clients to examine their values. What do they find important versus what others say is important? A good test of current values is to have a client review his or her bank statement and calendar for the last month. The way time and money is spent reflects what is currently important. If a person says he or she values one thing, but the last month's evidence shows something different, the

result is stress, guilt, or disappointment. Holiday celebrations should reflect personal values.

- *Plan ahead.* Rather than let the holidays happen, encourage clients to plan way ahead. Think mindfully about time and budget decisions. Carve out personal time and put it on the calendar. Proactively make reservations, buy tickets, ask for vacation and plan for important dates. There's less chance of feeling resentful if there's at least one thing on the calendar that's just for you.
- *Be assertive.* Protecting values and personal plans may require saying, "no" to other invitations. This can be very difficult for some people who fear making someone else mad, especially if that person is a family member. Clients will benefit from sorting out a healthy balance of accommodating others versus standing up for themselves. If this is a challenge, it's likely that the behavior extends past holiday commitments. Remind clients also that they don't control the feelings or reactions of others, only their own communication style.
- *Get support.* Clients struggling with substance abuse, domestic violence, trauma, grief, and eating disorders will benefit from regularly attending support groups. Schedule counseling appointments leading up to and after difficult holidays.
- *Celebrate the season, not the day.* Much of the stress of some holidays is the expectation that they can only be celebrated on a certain day. For people balancing several family commitments, this can be overwhelming and nearly impossible to please everyone. If spending time with people is that important, it should be just as meaningful the day before or after a holiday. Spending unrushed, quality time with someone is a better way to show care versus squeezing in a quick visit.
- *Create new traditions.* If past traditions feel outdated or painful, the holidays are an opportunity to create new ones. For people experiencing a loss, often a new tradition is started in memory of a loved one. Anything can be changed including the actual days celebrated, activities, meals and locations.
- *Give experiences.* Research suggests that there's more pleasure in receiving (and giving) experiences, like a special date, versus material items. Experiences require pre-planning and anticipation. This extends the pleasure, in addition to the actual activity and memories after the fact. Since the special date is not happening on the holiday, it's a future stand-alone event that can be better appreciated. For the gift giver, experiences can be more meaningful and less of a financial burden. Rather than buying a whole bunch of "things" at once, experiences can be spread out over the year.
- *Avoid social media.* Clients who struggle comparing their holiday to others should lessen their exposure to social media during that time. Therefore, they will need to develop an alternate behavioral plan for times when they normally would use social

media. For example, instead of checking status updates, they could go for a walk, color, read, listen to music, engage in a hobby, call a friend, etc.

Protection from Difficult People: Respectfully Disengage

A common reason that holidays can be hard is due to relationship conflict. In some cases, it's possible to end unhealthy relationships and never see the person again. But, if the difficult person is a family member, clients need a different solution. First, identify ways to limit face-to-face contact as well as by phone, texting and email. For instance, keep phone calls to 15 minutes or return calls the next day instead of immediately. Attend parties for shorter time periods or time your appearance for when others won't be there.

The next step is more difficult, but can be learned. When clients must physically be around difficult family members, they can do so without becoming emotionally engaged. Respectfully disengaging means that you're still polite, communicating when necessary. It's not giving the silent treatment, icy stares, or silently plotting sabotage because all of those behaviors are signs of being emotionally hooked.

Instead, when that difficult person puts out the verbal bait for an argument, disengagement means choosing not to bite. It also means you will no longer devote emotional energy to an unrealistic goal. Here's what it looks like:

- *Give up all efforts to change the other person.* Accept the person is difficult. That doesn't mean you agree or approve of the behavior, just believe what he or she is demonstrating and adapt. If the difficult behavior causes you more work, find different ways to respond other than waiting for the person to fix it. You might need to hire help, simplify plans, or allow the natural consequences of the person's lack of contribution.
- *Give up all efforts to get the other person to understand your pain or your version of the past.* Stop seeking someone else's approval for how you feel. End all conversations in which you try to explain (again) in an attempt to gain understanding or agreement that you're right. This in no way invalidates how you feel! It just means you will stop seeking agreement, including ending all attempts to solicit an (insincere) apology.
- *Stop complaining about who he/she is and what he/she does.* There is no reason to devote thoughts or conversation to perpetuating a problem that's not changing. Why invest energy talking about something that you have no control over? Let the person's behavior speak for itself without any further discussion.
- *Define yourself separate from the relationship.* Whatever role this person plays: spouse, child, sibling, parent, grandparent, etc. remember that it's just one part of your life. Think of all the other roles you have in addition to this relationship rather than let one toxic relationship define your life.

Shifting expectations isn't something you have to announce. It's a quiet, private decision you make for yourself. Don't confuse respectful disengagement with giving someone free reign to treat you poorly. There will be consequences for negative behavior. But, if every morning you wake up and think that maybe this will be the day the difficult person will change to please you, you're going to get hurt. This is different from ignoring the situation, pretending not to see what's going on. Rather, you're choosing to see everything clearly, yet not be disappointed by it.

By disengaging, you set yourself free by setting the difficult person free. That person is no longer responsible for fulfilling your needs, nor is he or she the answer to your problems. You're giving up the roles of monitor, caretaker, problem-fixer, and scorekeeper. There will be no more displays of disappointment because you will no longer require difficult people to be something they're not. Yes, this is hard! But, if you still need to work or live with this person, learning to respectfully disengage is necessary for self-preservation.

In Conclusion

Holidays can be emotional triggers for many clients. They may have suffered a loss or struggle with living up to the expectations of themselves or others. Clinicians can help by encouraging clients to set more realistic goals, clarify values, and create new traditions that are relevant and meaningful. In general, clients enjoy holidays more when they identify controllable factors, set healthy relationship boundaries, resist comparison to others and focus on less materialism.

Self-care is also an important factor. Whether it be setting aside quiet time or attending a support group, clients will feel less resentful if they know they've balanced personal time with other demands. Coping with the expectations of others, especially family, will require assertive communication. Sometimes the only way to cope with difficult people will be to respectfully disengage. This is when clients are taught to interact without emotionally engaging with a difficult person. People give holidays meaning, and clients can learn to give new meaning to a day that was once painful.

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TEST

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Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. A realistic goal for experiencing happiness is:
 - a) Happiness fluctuates based on circumstances
 - b) Happiness is a constant state
 - c) You can never be happy

2. One example of a holiday party situation that a client may find overwhelming is:
 - a) Knowing the lyrics to a song
 - b) Choice of gift-wrapping paper
 - c) Being surrounded by food and alcohol

3. Clients who are depressed or lonely may feel this after viewing social media:
 - a) Joy
 - b) Inferior
 - c) Wealthy

4. Emotional disengagement means to:
 - a) No longer complain about a difficult person
 - b) Give the silent treatment
 - c) Agree the other person is right

5. People give holidays meaning:
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

Signature _____ Date _____

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