

Holding the Tension of the Holidays:
Making Room for Peace, Joy and Compassion for Self and Others
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We are entering the season of late autumn and winter – a period in which we observe Mother Nature’s great process of shedding, gathering in, drawing down... Meanwhile Holidays/Holydays of various cultural traditions are also observed during this time and beacon us to join in the celebration – often to delicious excess! We may find ourselves in felt tension between wanting to “hunker down” quietly, and pressure to join in celebration with family and friends. Especially if we tend to be introverted in nature, or are in the midst of dealing with a recent loss or personal transition, finding the energy to respond to the invitations or expectations of others may feel impossible at times. Watching nature’s energy-saving strategies may hold some answers to this seasonal dilemma of choosing between opportunities for self-reflection/self-tending and for joining family celebrations or group holiday observances (“It wouldn’t be the same without you!”). Is it really possible to make healthy decisions for one’s self during the holidays without being a “party pooper” or spoiling it for others – especially for “the kids”? Following are some suggestions of ways to celebrate the holidays more “soulfully” and responsively. Let this be a springboard toward developing your own personal strategies and rituals for the Holidays.

- * Become aware of what parts of the holidays are most stressful for you so that you can take specific measures to manage/cope with those stressors (e.g., traffic and crowds, finances, gift exchange, special dietary concerns, pressures around entertaining, exposure to addiction relapse triggers ...)
- * Identify what calms you, relaxes you, energizes you...Make time to do those things to help regulate the “ups and downs” of the holidays.
- * Get plenty of rest. Take naps. Take walks. Eat nutritious food. Stay hydrated. Exercise – but don’t overdo, especially when ill. Try to get at least 15 minutes of sunlight every day. Use full spectrum lighting indoors to supplement decreased sunlight in the winter months.
- * Avoid attempting to escape stress through unhealthy behaviors, which usually compound the stress instead of relieving it. Such stress magnifiers may include: overeating, drinking to excess, multi-tasking (such as texting while driving or being otherwise occupied), and hyper vigilant behaviors such as repeatedly checking one’s email, weight, or “portfolio”...
- * Engage your senses with pleasurable scents and aromas. Use potpourris of natural seasonal fragrances (calming lavender, energizing peppermint or bergamot, comforting cinnamon, nutmeg, evergreen...). Try keeping a bottle of peppermint essential oil in your purse or car to help “reinvigorate” during long road trips or between activities
- * Remember that while your “to do lists” may be longer, the days are actually shorter this time of year. Don’t try to add extra holiday preparations and celebrations to an already over-filled calendar. Make choices. Delegate. Postpone what can be postponed. Encourage prep and clean-up parties – ask for help, turn on festive music or songs!
- * Holidays are not the time to do “family therapy” or to work through issues. Save confrontation for calmer times. If, for reasons of safety, a loved one’s behavior should require immediate intervention, remain calm. Consider obtaining professional support and assistance to assure that the action taken is kind and effective.

* Allow yourself to “ground” when feeling adrift in holiday frenzy through participation in family, cultural or religious celebrations while also giving yourself the freedom to set boundaries, create new rituals for yourself and your family. Give yourself permission to find new personal meaning for traditional symbols and practices.

* Acknowledge, honor those family members who are missing at the table due to death, illness, or other circumstance. Speak their names out loud. Share stories. Display pictures. Or if the absence or loss feels more personal, and the grief more private, create your own rituals, “altars” at home. Light a candle, take some time for memories and reflection – then intentionally engage in an activity that gently brings you back to the present moment with a sense of comfort and hope (e.g., enjoy sipping tea, or watching birds from your favorite chair).

* Create family where you are planted. Mix & match friends and family and let go of the consequences! Trust a loved one to be alone over the holidays if that is what (s)he chooses – give them an open invitation to change their mind at the last minute or to get together after the pressure of the holidays is over.

* Try to let go of perfectionism or “all or nothing” thinking – especially during the holidays. Consider the gift of real presence at holiday functions. Create safe space for yourself in a group by moving in & out, getting a breath of fresh air, taking a walk, excusing yourself when you have reached your “limit”. If you are hosting – try to keep it simple or at least enjoy the pleasure of stretching to make those extra touches happen. And remember to ask for help, assistance, support, a listening ear...

* Find comfort in the darkness and Bring in the Light! Whether you observe Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanza(a), The Winter Solstice – or perhaps a rich combination of all – consider each tradition’s use of seasonal candles and lighting. Take time to enjoy sparkling Christmas lights or to laze in front of a burning Yule log. Light a candle, a Menorah, a Kinara. Take time to gaze at the winter sky.

* Laugh! Dance! Play interactive games! Hang out with children & animals.

* The spirit of the season promotes “Unconditional Positive Regard”. Try to keep your expectations realistic – of yourself and others.