

When You Dread the Holidays

Having gone through divorce myself, I know that single-again adults often find the holiday season to be one of the most dreaded times of the year.

After several years of divorce recovery ministry and time spent with the Lord instead of listening to the messages of our pop culture and the media, I have discovered healthy ways for single people to cope with the apprehension of the looming holidays.

I'm not talking about an unrealistic "just don't think about it" mentality, pretending the day doesn't evoke nostalgia or a longing to have someone special by your side. We were created for companionship; our thoughts and feelings do not astonish or offend God.

Instead of focusing on what is missing, I suggest allowing the yearnings of the season to draw you toward God and asking Him to divulge the desires of your heart. Be aware! When we truly look to Him, He may use this season to reveal where our hearts need further healing. The Creator of our hearts is the only one who understands where we may have been severely damaged by previous relationships, a painful childhood, low self-worth or numerous other issues. Because of His great love and compassion for us, Jesus grasps the depth of the injury. If we surrender to His tender touch, He will patiently heal each wound. The result will be a healthy, healed heart that is ready for romance.

So how do we keep the holidays from becoming an emotional meltdown during this healing process? I've listed some practical ways to cope and even thrive during this time:

- Don't hibernate or wait until the day before the holiday to make a plan. Force yourself to be with other people, even if only briefly.
- Connect with a support group at church. They often have fun activities planned.
- Develop a coping strategy. Review whom to call or where to go if the stress or pain becomes too severe.
- If your child is with the other parent, drop off a small gift, if appropriate.
- Create new, meaningful traditions. Handmade decorations, pizza, cakes or cookies go over great with kids. I know parents who began these traditions when the kids were small and their now-adult children still look forward to them.
- Take those creations to people who are alone, such as an exchange student, a detention home, a jail or prison, a residence for pregnant girls, an elderly friend, a homebound person or a shelter.
- Help your child make a gift for your ex-spouse or former in-laws. This communicates to the child your permission to love the other family, and it greatly reduces fear and tension.
- Take notice of a married friend who may be discouraged or rejected. Remember, some of the loneliest people on the planet are married. While others are receiving cards and gifts, this day may be a reminder of a spouse who is thoughtless or unloving.
- Try out a new "family-focused" restaurant with other parents. Avoid the ones that cater to couples or may have romantic overtones.
- Have a potluck supper with each person bringing a favorite chocolate treat.
- Do something completely different. Go roller-skating, skiing, hiking to the mountains or to the beach.

- Send a card, flowers or a small gift to someone who has comforted and loved you.
- Write a poem or journal entry listing things you're grateful for.
- Treat yourself to a massage, manicure or pedicure.
- Volunteer to work a concession stand to raise missions money, take kids to a movie, repaint or wallpaper the church nursery.
- Immerse your family in assembling a model airplane, a Lego adventure or a jigsaw puzzle.
- Get out the hammer and build something.
- Treat yourself to cozy bed linens or a new nightgown in a magnificent color.
- Try a new pillow or neck exercises. They work wonders for tension.
- Make yourself a warm comforting drink, such as hot cocoa, chai or herbal tea.
- Construct an old train set.
- Invite friends over for dinner and use the good linens and china.
- Attend a hockey or basketball game, or participate in one.
- Get enough sunshine. Winter's shorter daylight hours can take their toll on the emotions. If you work where there are few windows, take a walk during lunch or on your break.
- Exercise. It produces natural stress reducers, and it's a great way to meet new people. Many gyms have child care available.
- Buy yourself a present. However, you'll need to be careful if you have a tendency to numb your pain by spending money.
- Use calligraphy to write your favorite Bible verse, or try your hand at drawing or sculpting.
- If you're feeling suicidal, seek help immediately. The phone number of your counselor, pastor, close friend or hotline should be taped to your phone. Don't minimize the effect the holiday can have on your mental state.
- Don't anesthetize your loneliness with drugs or alcohol. These chemicals induce depression leading to a greater sense of isolation.
- Avoid bars or singles joints. They will produce a temptation to use sex as a way to numb the pain or ease the isolation.
- Tuck away photographs or items that will trigger melancholy.
- Stay away from movies that focus on people falling in love, weddings, sexuality, adultery or emotionally wounded children. Seek films that are funny with a lighthearted plot.
- Steer clear of music, fragrances or foods that arouse depressing memories.
- Avoid organizing an event at work unless the majority of coworkers are single also.
- Print out and memorize a Bible verse that proves you are deeply loved and not alone, such as Deuteronomy 31:6; Isaiah 43:1, 4a; Psalm 91; John 14:8; Romans 8:15; Philippians 4:6-8; 1 Peter 5:7.

by Laura Petherbridge

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