

Coping Skills for the Holidays

by Pat Barton

For some people, trying to get through the holidays can be very stressful, and sometimes depressing. Many feel obligated to give gifts, even if their income does not allow it, or they have lost their jobs.

The suicide rate increases during the holidays, amongst those who have nobody to share that time with. It can be a very lonely period in one's life. I can relate to that feeling, because my mother passed away recently. She was the only parent I've had since 2005, when my father died, and my four siblings and daughter show no interest in including me in their lives. I took care of my mother for a few months, day in and day out, before she passed away, so I had the opportunity to bond with her in a very special way. That makes it all the more difficult to spend the upcoming holidays without her and the German holiday traditions we kept alive each year for decades.

Since I know what it's like to be alone for the holidays, I want to offer suggestions to those who find themselves experiencing that feeling. Even though the following suggestions are very helpful, the one I'd like to add to this list, which I have discovered personally to be the most helpful to me, is that of reaching out to others. I volunteer to feed the homeless on Thanksgiving and Christmas. It creates such a rewarding, warm and special feeling inside me, when I see how grateful (in their facial expressions) the homeless are when someone shows they care, by offering to spend time with them. I sing Christmas songs to them, read Christmas stories and pass out toys to their children, or even sit and chat a few minutes while they eat, if they ask me to. One family even asked me to sit and say "grace" with them. I also offer to take a family picture (free of charge) for them to treasure always, and keep as a reminder that someone cares. Reaching out to others is cathartic. It also takes one's mind off of his/her own loneliness and helps a person to focus on others who are in a worse situation. It helps me to become more cognizant of and grateful for what I have, and not focus on what I don't have. Here are a few other tips to get you through the holidays:

1. Three slow, deep belly breaths can work wonders to calm your nerves.
2. Focus on experiences rather than material things.
3. Take care of yourself first (think of the airplane-oxygen mask analogy). It is ok to say "no".
4. Minimize your time with people who stress you out. Instead, surround yourself with those who are supportive, encouraging, nurturing, and positive.
5. Nutrition is important. Excessive sugar consumption can contribute to depression.
6. Exercise is too! Much research shows exercise is as effective as antidepressants.
7. Getting a massage or taking a hot bath, while listening to soft, soothing music and/or utilizing aroma therapy or a lavender-scented candle are great stress-relievers.
8. Recognize what you do and don't have control over.
9. Avoid or minimize alcohol, especially in situations where you are not with people in whom you trust and feel safe with. And, remember that alcohol is a depressant.
10. Get support – from friends, family, or maybe a counselor or support group.

I wish all of you peace and love all year round!