



Doctor Debug™

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The Holiday Season Roller Coaster

Halloween has come and gone, but you know what? The really scary holidays are just around the corner.

As much as we love a few days off and a good celebration, the great American November and December holidays are capable of giving us some significant emotional challenges. Unlike Halloween, which is all about "pretending," the conflicted feelings connected to the winter holiday season are *for real*.

In fact, one of the most famous stress-measurement tests — take a deep breath —

the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Rating Scale, rates "Christmas" as one point *higher* for stress than a minor violation of the law. On top of that, we Northwesterners also get the additional biological burden of shorter and darker days.

Even if you do not personally have any serious issues with the holiday season, take note; you *will be* surrounded by people who do. The holiday emotional roller coaster has arrived. Welcome aboard, and don't forget to fasten your seat belt.

Thanksgiving is a time in which families do their best to get together and renew their bonds. A 1997 survey by American

Demographics showed that six out of 10 adults named "family" as the most important thing for which they were thankful. However, families are now more fractured than ever and getting the whole "family" together could mean trying to bring together challenging sets of people like ex-spouses, ex-spouses' new partners, biological kids and stepkids, and biological and step-grandparents. Children of divorces have the especially complex task of trying to visit *both* of their biological parents, who may be geographically distant from each other. To be dealt with, or ignored, are old grudges and other obstacles that have gotten in the way of loving relationships.

And then there's Christmas itself. Just *what* are Americans actually celebrating on and around Christmas Day? Take your pick: Hanukkah, birth of Jesus, Kwanzaa, a magical tree, gift giving, Santa Claus, Sinterklaas, Saint Nicholas, children in general, good children, neighborliness, love, family, a funny, little, parasitic bush that used to be thought of as a cure for sterility and an antidote for poisons (mistletoe), the invention of the electric light bulb, a day or two off from work, Christmas bonuses, football bowl games, and/or consummate

consumerism. You can hunker down during the holidays, but you can't really escape.

Debugging Holiday Challenges

Here are a few ideas to think about and a couple of things that have worked for me to make the holiday season a little less buggy. I call it the four R's -- Be Realistic, Give Respect, Reach Out, Remember the Real Reason.

Be Realistic

For those of us who have bought into the need to buy extravagant gifts, or to try to solve long-standing family or relationship problems, or to attend every party we are invited to, we need to learn to respect both our own and other people's limitations, and be realistic. Prioritizing and letting go are good exercises for overachiever types. Since everything cannot be done perfectly, we need to decide what is the most important, and let the rest go.

This may mean sending out fewer but more meaningful holiday cards. For some families, this may mean establishing gift-giving rules, such as limiting gifts to one or two per person.

Give Respect

Respect is the opposite of expect. Respect means honoring

the current situation and not trying too hard to change it for now. It means accepting each person's needs and individual ways of celebrating or *not* celebrating. There are many folks who have lost loved ones, or who have experienced illness or trauma. They feel lousy and the holiday season is not going to cheer them up.

Respect means respecting the gifts that come our way. Respect for our own feelings may mean limiting our exposure to family members who are rude or obnoxious. It may mean making sure we have a friend we can call if our family get-together becomes too much for us to handle.

Reach Out

Reach out for support, reach out to care, or reach out for one

new experience. The holiday season is toughest on those of us who feel lonely and rejected. Reaching out for support can be almost impossible when we are down. So, if you can muster up the nerve to ask for support, go for it.

If not, consider reaching out in some other way. Reach out to others by volunteering some time (go to SeattleWorks.org or call 206-324-0808). Or, reach out for one new accomplishment or new experience this holiday season. When we advance some part of ourselves, we feel better, even if it is simply going to a poetry reading, or to a museum or church we have shied away from.

Remember the Real Reason

No matter what our religious or spiritual beliefs may be, there is a theme to the holiday season

of giving to others, whether through gift-giving or through acts of kindness. These days, that theme has gotten a bit buried under the weight of commercial enterprise, but it is still there, loud and clear. Remembering the essence of the season should allow us to give up that race for the best parking place, the best gift, the best place in line, the best tree, or the best party.

On a very simple level, Thanksgiving is a day on which to give thanks and the winter holiday season is about unconditional love.

Keeping the essence of these holidays in mind can keep us not only mostly sane, but often even smiling. Best wishes, and take care!

—*Doctor Debug*

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Feeling bugged? Write to Doctor Debug, a psychiatrist with 27 years of counseling experience. Ask him about mental wellness, or send questions regarding personal, social, relationship, medication or sexual concerns.

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