

Life, Work & Family

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Make the Holidays Your Own



OK. So it's that time of year again. We take one look at the calendar and we're hit with pictures of perfect holidays: kids frolicking in the snow, huge families laughing around a huge meal, and smitten couples exchanging gifts in front of the fireplace. The pressure is on: Make the traditional holiday images come to life, or else!

But what about those of us who aren't included those snapshots? What if we're single, without little ones to decorate the Christmas tree or light menorah candles? More and more of us are divorced and part of blended families who are dealing with multiple traditions in the same house. The truth is that lots of all-American families today don't have a mom, dad and 2.5 Norman Rockwell children. And for many of us, the pressure becomes too much. There's only one thing to do if you don't belong in a traditional holiday portrait: Make the holidays your own by discovering your own traditions.

Figure Out What You Want

Basically, holiday stress is caused by unrealistic expectations. In one word, stress is "should." During the months ahead everyone, but particularly those of us who don't live anywhere near "It's a Wonderful Life," can use a reminder to concentrate on our needs and what we want to do, not what we've come to believe we should do.

Before the holidays, spend some time with yourself. Set aside a couple of days to examine what you're really looking for during the holidays. If you had it your way, how would you paint the picture? Are the holidays about extended family, or about solitude? Is this the time to explore cultural roots and re-connect with religion, or a chance to reach out to strangers? Forget about what everyone else says or what your mother's always done, what do you want your holiday traditions to be?

Going it Alone, or Not

If you're single, you might look into doing volunteer work at a local soup kitchen, food bank or homeless shelter. Or maybe you want to do something totally self-indulgent. What's stopping you from spending a day relaxing at a spa, hiking or biking, or hopping on a plane and enjoying the holidays at the beach? Rely upon your family of friends who may have all sorts of interesting things cooking. Also, friends with kids are not off limits during the holidays. If you want to be around children, find the families in your circle who'll welcome a guest to a holiday meal, and then ask what you can contribute. Maybe you're helping them fulfill their tradition. And the holidays tend put extra pressure on new relationships, whether it's a new romance or a new family set-up. Keep in mind that now is not the time to force things. Concentrate on what's truly at the core of the

holidays for you and find ways to embrace that together. Have fun. Chances are the new people in your life will feel relief as well, not having to rush into a role loaded with expectations.

Blending a Family Means Staying Flexible

Blended families are faced with a particular challenge during the holidays. For kids and adults, thinking about celebrations past inevitably brings back memories, good and bad. It's important to talk about what each side of the family used to do, and what the new family can do now to make things special. Be flexible. It may be combining traditions or it may be starting fresh. Planning can get complicated if the holidays are divided between families, but kids often don't mind celebrating more than once—in a different way in each home, no matter what date the celebration happens to fall upon.

Make a List of “No’s”

Just as important as your holiday wish list is pinning down what you don't want. Come up with a list of all the things that are not part of your ideal holiday, even if you may not be able to realistically eliminate them. Do you really want to deal with expensive gifts this year? Must you make an appearance at your neighbor's annual party? Do you have to invite your husband's ex-wife over for dinner? Include everything that makes you nervous just thinking about it. Call it a “stress list.”

Then practice saying “No.” It may sound silly, but practice it in front of the mirror. You'll probably find it works remarkably well when the time comes. And if not, at least you were on the record.

Timing is Everything

If you decide to shake your holidays up a bit, start planning early. Don't ambush your loved ones at the last minute by opting out of the family meal and announcing a solo trip to Mexico, or throw a new tradition at the kids on Christmas eve. You may have shifted your outlook, but it could take some time for the rest of the world to join you.

Change isn't always easy, especially when we're bombarded with old-fashioned “Wish this were you!” images and candle-lit memories of what really—probably—wasn't. But once you can let go of the unrealistic expectations, visualize what you need and take the holidays into your own hands, you're one step closer to having a stress-free season truly worth remembering.

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Successful Stepparenting

The blending of two families is never easy. Children harbor memories of a family that once existed and has now been replaced because of a choice they did not make. As much as they may want to be part of a family again, this new environment will feel foreign to them. But stepfamilies can survive - even thrive - as a result of planning, give and take, and most importantly, time.

The biological relationship between parent and child is very different from a stepparent/stepchild relationship. A step relationship should be treated as any other “friendship”; it must grow over time. When a new spouse is placed in the role of mother or father, a child cannot automatically evoke feelings of caring and respect for him or her. The loyalty they feel toward their natural mother or father will likely force them to resist any desire to do so. Similarly, a stepparent cannot automatically assume the role of loving mother or father. In many second families a new stepparent may never have had children before, making the whole concept of parenting foreign to him or her.



So what can couples do to create a home environment that will nurture these fragile relationships? The key is to allow them to develop naturally, with each new experience, just as other relationships do. Chances are the relationship with your partner was not pre-arranged marriage. You met and, over time, fell in love. Give your stepchildren the same opportunity.

Let go of preconceived notions about what the relationship will be like. If you have an idea of the "perfect" stepmother/stepdaughter relationship in your mind, let it go. Instead, let it evolve naturally. Don't try too hard (or get frustrated) if things aren't moving quickly enough. The same redeeming qualities that made your partner fall in love with you will eventually become apparent to his or her child. If you just "get along" and are respectful and amicable to one another, that's a good enough place to start.

Agree with your partner and with the children on rules and limits for the household. Allow everyone's feelings to be heard and taken into consideration and make rules that everyone can agree on. This will require concessions on both parts, but if the children feel they are taken seriously and that their feelings are being respected, they will be more likely to abide by the house rules.

Similarly, agree together as a group on consequences to breaking the rules.

Allow the children to feel they can talk about their natural parent. It is healthy for them to maintain affection for him or her. View it as an indication of their ability to love, not as a threat to the relationship that you're trying to build.

Logistically, keep as many things consistent in the children's lives as possible. If you're moving into a new home, avoid relocating out of their school district. Make sure they remain involved in sports or other activities they've previously participated. It's important right now for other relationships in the child's life to remain intact. Expect difficult times. They occur in every family and are a natural part of a family's growth and development. Many times, the strongest bonds are formed as a result of the most challenging situations.

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The Hardest Decision: Is it Time for Residential Care?



If you're considering moving a loved one from home into residential care, you've likely done some soul-searching. Making the move to a less independent environment-particularly a nursing home-raises many issues in families. You may be facing guilt, remorse, or worry over your loved one's care and potential costs. These feelings are normal. While there is no magic way to make the decision easy, these tips may help you lighten your load.

Scope out the alternatives

There may be ways to deter the move to out-of-home care you haven't considered. Investigate adult day care, home care, or live-in care.

If you need help assessing a love one's need or arranging services (particularly if you live far from your loved one), consider contacting a geriatric care manager.

If you feel you've explored ways for keeping a loved one home and it still won't work, you'll have a better sense that you have exhausted your other options and residential care makes sense.

Recognize feelings of guilt

Guilt can immobilize you. It is common to feel guilty because you can't or don't want to shoulder the burden of

care. Some people even feel guilty if their own health or physical stamina aren't enough to cope with heavy care needs at home. The strain of caring for someone at home can also lead to an emotional breaking point.

You should not feel guilty or ashamed to admit you may be jeopardizing your own health or well being to continue providing care at home.

Examine your relationship with the care recipient

If you have a positive relationship with your loved one, it will likely be easier to make a transition to out-of-home care. When possible, you should include the person in the decision-making process and listen compassionately to their concerns. To get the ball rolling with a parent, read communicating with your aging parent.

Unfortunately, not everyone has a smooth relationship with a parent or spouse. Anger over old unresolved issues can resurface. Communication may be poor. In this case, recognize that coming to a decision will be harder.

Think about what's best for your loved one

Sometimes, circumstances dictate that a change must be made. Despite our best intentions, we cannot control major life events. Even if you have "promised" a loved one never to put him in a nursing home, his physical or mental deterioration may now make it unsafe to remain at home. While, its important to honor a loved one's preference for independence, you must also be realistic.

Get some support

If you're having trouble making a decision alone, you should rally your support network. Talk to other family members--even if the family is spread out geographically. A professional counselor or spiritual advisor can also help you talk through the emotions of this difficult decision.

Another option is to look for a local caregiver support group.

Research residential care facilities

Not all-residential care means a nursing home. Facilities vary widely in terms of services, comforts and cost. You can learn more about what's out there by reading the article on out-of-home care options.

Plan to visit any facilities you are considering. You can use our handy checklists to help you evaluate the quality of any facility. Or, look into professional services to evaluate facilities for you.

Don't be a martyr

It's okay to think about yourself. If you've been a full-time caregiver, or just consumed with worry over a loved one's daily care needs, you deserve to have a life of your own. Moving someone to a facility doesn't mean giving-up or cutting your attachments. Many families continue to be involved in their loved ones' lives after a residential placement. Whatever you decide, make sure you can integrate some free time into your life to get out of the house, see friends and enjoy hobbies. Give yourself permission to take care of your own needs.

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