

Holiday Woe

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Originally published in *Coast Magazine*, December 2005

It's holiday time again, when family, friends, and colleagues come together to celebrate, count blessings, and enjoy the spirit of the season. A time to consciously reflect on the year that has passed and enjoy the give and take that symbolizes feelings for family and friends.

But for too many, the holidays are bittersweet at best, and at worst, a time of alienation, loss, depression, envy, and remembrance of deep wounds left over from childhood.

Those with unhappy memories of childhood experiences around the holidays often find these memories returning this time of year. They may feel strong mixed emotions about being with family members with whom they have less than gratifying relations. Or, they may have become so distanced from relatives, they don't want to be with them at all, creating feelings of guilt. For some, coming together with family is forced and artificial, done mostly out of a sense of obligation. This is further aggravated by the feeling they must give gifts or show affection that isn't genuine.

Growing numbers of boomers are forced to face the holidays without their parents, who have died. Remembering past holidays spent together may touch off a renewed bout of loss and mourning.

For those recently separated or divorced, it may be difficult to be in the presence of other family members or friends whose relationships are still intact. Feelings of isolation from children and personal failure may be renewed.

If all this isn't enough, the end of the year may bring on a self-critique of not having accomplished all that you hoped during the year.

The message of the season is to "catch the spirit," be generous, and to think of others, not just ourselves. It's to tap into a higher meaning and purpose beyond ourselves. And yet we know how easy this meaning may be tainted by the media advertiser's design to show our love for others through extravagant purchases.

In this affluent area, those not as financially fortunate are forced to watch their envy rise when they can't afford to give the pricey gifts they see others giving and receiving around them. And of course, when they don't receive these gifts themselves.

For those who get depressed, pay attention to how much your mood may be touched off by memories of childhood rather than what is happening presently.

If depressive feelings relate to separation from others, make the decision to spend time around people who can be nourishing. If that isn't possible, find a support group of others looking for community. Resist the temptation to indulge in self-pity.

Try to avoid feelings of obligatory cheerfulness. There are few things worse than forcing yourself to feel something that isn't genuine. Doing so typically leads to over-indulgence in alcohol, food, and spending sprees as a way to alter your mood so you won't feel left out. It's also common to substitute food and drink to fill up any sense of emptiness or fear of relating socially.

Take some time to reflect on what you're grateful for and what you've learned about yourself in the last year. Be generous with yourself, accepting your changing thoughts and moods without self-criticism. While some reflection on past holiday seasons will keep you in touch with the flow of your life, don't get caught there and miss the opportunities for true joy and celebration that exist in the present.

And, when in doubt, gaze into the sparkling eyes of entranced young children lost in celebration to remember the original innocent beauty and wonder of the season.