

HOW TO TURN HOLIDAY BLAHS INTO HOLIDAY AHHHS

As the holiday season approaches we are bombarded with glossy images of perfect families in perfect homes interacting with each other with warmth, humor, love and respect. These portraits of perfectly harmonious family gatherings are perpetrated by a media culture that creates expectations that can hardly be met by reality.

Unfortunately we have internalized these visions and have set ourselves up for many disappointments. Perfection is an illusion and trying to reach it is futile. Especially when it comes to family relationships. No wonder therapists are kept very busy during this season as anxiety, depression, frustration, anger, and sadness run rampant.

I conducted a small informal survey posing the following question: "What are your greatest stressors during the holidays?" Invariably "family conflict" issues kept coming up in the top 3. My subjects expressed concerns about people getting along, feeling torn where to spend holidays and nervousness about coping with negativity aimed at them from family members.

Most family conflicts arise from the same core issues that are rooted in the past and keep coming up over and over in one form or another. There should be no surprises during holiday family get togethers. The critics will remain critical, controllers will remain controlling, competitors will continue competing and the jabbers will continue jabbing. Hot buttons will inevitably be pushed and conflicts may arise.

When a hot button gets pushed strong painful feelings of being judged, rejected, devalued, unappreciated, criticized, humiliated may be triggered. People typically respond to assaults by becoming defensive, withdrawing, arguing or melting down. These reactions, while natural, also place you in a disempowered position. You lose control and can no longer take care of yourself.

The following are some suggestions to help you turn the holiday BLAHS into holiday AHHHS:

- Keep expectations real. Shed any illusions about how things will be different this time. People don't change unless they recognize their shortcomings and work hard at fixing them.

- Recognize that you have no control over what happens between other family members. You are responsible only for yourself. The only person you have control of is yourself.

- Accept that some people are toxic. . No matter how you try to get along with them they will somehow find a way to be hurtful. With people like that it is not

about you. Their behavior is a reflection of who they are,

-Remember that not all comments, opinions or suggestions made by family members are meant in a negative way. When times are stressful and emotions run high it is easy to misinterpret something benign to be an assault on your self esteem. It doesn't hurt to ask what was meant by what they said before you react.

-Establish internal boundaries. Do not internalize someone else's characterization of you if you know it not to be true. Do not allow people to "guilt" you into doing things you do not wish to do.

-You have a right to make rational choices for yourself even if someone may be slighted, as long as you handle it kindly.

-If you feel hurt by someone who is important to you wait til things have cooled down and let them know in a calm and rational way. If the person is not important, why bother. Just distance yourself from them in the future. They should not matter and neither should their opinion. They are not worth the emotional energy you have to put out.

-Check yourself and make sure you are not guilty of what behaving in ways you find offensive in others.

Happy Holidays,