

Published November 11th, 2009

Family Focus Enjoying the Holidays

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



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their home for family celebrations. They had a large house and could accommodate everyone comfortably. Both of Amy's parents drank heavily during these family get-togethers and became belligerent and argumentative with each other. Everyone present experienced the tension but felt somewhat trapped. It's interesting how we sometimes continue to follow the same routine or tradition, even if it's not working well for us.

Before the holidays approached the following year, Amy and Eric decided to talk to her two brothers and their wives about the problem. All agreed that they wanted to continue getting together, but with certain changes. They decided to take turns hosting Thanksgiving and Christmas, despite having much smaller houses than their parents, and to celebrate in the early afternoon without alcohol. One of Amy's brothers told their parents what they had decided and why. Surprisingly, their parents agreed to go along with the new arrangements without protest. The younger members of the family had tried to protect the parents' feelings when, in retrospect, it may not have even been necessary. Amy and Eric had a much happier holiday experience after they were able to identify the source of their apprehension and devise a plan to deal with it.

Here's to enjoying your holidays and creating happy memories!

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We've heard countless times how stressful the holiday season can be. Part of the stress can come from the differing expectations we have during this time of year. Part of it can come from the forced proximity to certain family members who may not be on our most-favored list. And, of course, part of the stress can come from trying to do too much and please too many people -- the sheer exhaustion of it all. As a matter of fact, it's stressful reading and thinking about how stressful it can be!

Someone close to me, who will remain unidentified, is an excellent cook. Whenever we host holiday gatherings, he enjoys preparing most of the meal. However, since he is a perfectionist about his culinary efforts, occasionally he used to bark orders at the "help" -- his family and friends - in the final phase of assembling the food. No one reacted favorably to his verbalizations, so this did not result in moments of peace and love. Over time, we finally convinced him that a happy environment is much more important than the fine touches on a gourmet meal.

After all, when our children reminisce about their family holidays, what they really treasure are the warm feelings associated with the traditions and celebrations. It doesn't matter to them if the gravy is too thick, or if gifts are wrapped perfectly, or the house is decorated exquisitely. It doesn't matter if every holiday activity can't be squeezed in. Above all, children appreciate an atmosphere of happiness and fun.

One guaranteed method to avoid "sweating the small stuff" is to find ways to help others. The focus can shift away from ourselves as we consider other people and their needs. And our children learn valuable lessons when they can think beyond themselves and give to others.

Some people dread holiday gatherings. Sometimes it's because of hurtful memories from the past or strained relationships among family members. If you are experiencing reluctance to gather with your extended family, or if you see signs that your children are having difficulty, it is important to identify what is interfering with your holiday enjoyment so you can decide how to deal with it. One couple I worked with expressed anxiety about the holiday season. Eric and Amy lived close to Amy's parents, who expected their three grown children and five grandchildren to congregate at