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Do You Have Suggestions For Dealing With Holiday Expectations?

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A weekly question/answer column

Do You Have Suggestions For Dealing With Holiday Expectations?

Tom Lee answers:*

As each Christmas approaches, we anticipate the family fun and togetherness, the giving of gifts, and the observance of family traditions. Expectations can create problems, however, if we get into a “now or never” frame of mind about holidays. We may think, “If this party (gift, family activity) isn’t just right, the whole season will be ruined and another won’t come for a whole year.” Or, “The children will never be this age again. They just have to love every minute and have every toy.” We set ourselves up for a letdown when we tell ourselves that this is our chance to get everything just right.

Being overtired can also result in feelings of depression if our quest for Christmas cheer becomes too frenzied. Financial worries over not being able to do or buy all the things that we see depicted in advertisements can also lead to feelings of inadequacy and sadness.

Christmas can be especially difficult for those who have experienced the death of someone close to them and are facing the holidays for the first time without them. Even after many years, Christmas becomes another marker of how many Christmases it has been since the person died. Other kinds of loss or family disruptions can also make the holidays difficult.

To find some meaning and enjoyment in the holidays, here are some tips:

- Focus on one or two things that you enjoy and plan to do those. Pace yourself. Which holiday activities really bring enjoyment? Are there other activities you impose on yourself or your family that aren’t as enjoyable? Don’t let the things that matter most be at the mercy of the things that matter least. What is it you remember fondly about past Christmases? What is going to mean the most to your family or other loved ones? It may be time spent together, rather than a frantic rush to plan or do one more thing.
- Some Christmas traditions may not fit as well as they once did if there have been family changes such as deaths or remarriages or children getting older. Focus on the traditions that are meaningful or start new ones. Spending Christmas in a new way may bring a new appreciation of the season.
- Make expectations more reasonable. Instead of saying, “Things just have to go well...” try “It will be nice if...”; and instead of “I just can’t stand it if...” remind yourself “It will still be OK even if...”
- Christmas is a great time, but it isn’t the only time. Plan some things to look forward to beyond the holidays. Plan to show love for your family and friends throughout the year.

* Tom Lee is Utah State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist