

## How to Survive Through the Holidays

By Wendy Iglehart, LCPC

Bah-hum-bug. During a recent separation or divorce around the holiday time, you could be experiencing painful emotions. When the decorations loom everywhere and the festive music blares in the stores, you may wonder if you can endure the season unscathed. The answer is -- Yes. With these ten practical suggestions, you can navigate the holiday with your well-being remaining intact.

1. **Breath** - Inhale through your nose to the count of four, hold for the count of seven, and exhale to the count of eight. Repeat this sequence at least five times.

*Why Helpful:* Tense chest and back muscles restrict the lungs depriving the body of necessary oxygen. The controlled breath opens the lungs and relaxes the muscles; the brain can better focus which allows you to be mindful of the present moment.

2. **Break Time Down** - Manage your day into parts, such as the morning or the next couple of hours. For example, try to shop for gifts for three hours rather than doing the errand all day.

*Why Helpful:* The notion of facing the entire holiday season can be an obstacle. When simpler goals are accomplished, you feel hopeful and less overwhelmed. Furthermore, the concept of permanency (such as "I will never get through my week.") becomes abolished.

3. **Escape Plan** - Create a plan to leave a situation when it becomes too stressful. It could be helpful to have a friend or family member accessible should you need to abandon ship.

*Why Helpful:* This will enhance your sense of control and freedom, in turn, reducing the amount of the stress hormone (Cortisol) released into your brain.

4. **Prepare for Emotions** – Give yourself permission to be human. Feelings are a significant part of the daily experience so be gentle with yourself.

*Why Helpful:* Emotions could surface at the oddest or worst time. For example, while food shopping you could experience a meltdown in the aisle because this use to be your partner's chore. It is easier to undergo intense feelings when not blindsided.

5. **Prepare for Thoughts** - Dispute negative thoughts about yourself and the situation.

*Why Helpful:* Our perception of ourselves, experiences, and relationships influence our mood. When thoughts are reframed from "the pain will never go away" to "I will find a way to manage", you begin to have authority with choices in difficult circumstances.

6. **Move** - Stretch, practice yoga, walk, swim, dance, run, play with the dog, have a snowball fight with the kids -- just move.

*Why Helpful:* Endorphins released into the brain boost your mood. Also, your body is kept in shape.

7. **Laugh** - Watch a funny movie or listen to a comedian.

*Why Helpful:* Research shows wonderful health benefits to laughter. It relaxes muscles, increases blood flow and oxygen, reduces blood pressure, releases the "feel good" brain chemicals (Serotonin and Dopamine), and assists in the flow of creativity.

8. **Get Enough Rest and Eat Healthy** - Your sleep pattern and eating habits could be changed.

Use your imagination to adjust accordingly. For example, avoid looking at the time on the alarm clock when your sleep is interrupted; this perpetuates anxiety.

*Why Helpful:* With proper rest and healthy eating, you remain more alert, support the immunity system, and complete the daily activities with more ease.

9. **Surround Yourself with Good Family and Friends** - Practice altruism. Especially resist the temptation to isolate yourself.

*Why Helpful:* Altruism is defined as the unselfish devotion to the welfare of others. Studies show an altruistic act releases the attachment chemical (Oxytocin) into the brain which enhances connection and perception of well-being. This becomes a "win-win" scenario -- you and your family/friends feel good.

10. **Start New Traditions** - Explore different ideas to reduce the sense of powerlessness. The loss of your family unit could be magnified during holidays with the absence of the family customs.

*Why Helpful:* The act of change and the acceptance of circumstances empower you and better align you to care for yourself (and your child/children).

Utilizing these simple strategies will help you cope with the painful emotions and situations.

Maybe you will even gain insight about you and your strength. Maybe.

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