

PTSD and Holidays

Most people do not realize that people with PTSD have anniversary reactions. Holidays may also be anniversaries of trauma and bring up a lot of pain. This is one of the most distressing forms of reexperiencing for survivors and their families.

If the survivor doesn't recognize that this is one of the symptoms of PTSD, he or she may feel like Scrooge instead of like a normal human being who went through hell at that time of the year.

If the family doesn't understand that this is a PTSD anniversary reaction, they may be very angry at the survivor. "What is wrong with you?" is a heart-rending, humiliating question when the survivor doesn't know why s/he reacts like this.

If your veteran spent a particularly horrible Christmas seeing villagers lose all they had, seeing friends die, seeing the fat cats in the rear partying while the troops were suffering, he may have a hard time with Christmas. If your abusive father tore up the Christmas tree every year, if your uncle molested you at the family get together when you were eight, if you got mugged while out Christmas shopping, or date raped after an office party, or if your violent family pretended nothing was wrong during the holidays, these upcoming holidays may be a hard time for you. This is a normal reaction.

Holidays are also a really stressful time for many trauma survivors because they seem to reinforce the outsidersness of being a survivor of trauma. Everyone else seems so happy while your guts are twisted into knots as you think about past events. For veterans and other survivors, this pain can be compounded by grief for lost friends and their families who now face the holidays without those loved ones who didn't survive. Guilt may also rear its painful head. Why did I survive?

The financial difficulties many trauma survivors experience are highlighted by the commercialization of the holidays. There are a lot of pressures to conform.

One of my first healthy actions in my marriage was to decide that Bob didn't have to celebrate Christmas after he came back from Vietnam. I loved it so I should celebrate it and let him be him. I have no idea where that idea came from but it saved me a lot of fights. Today I look back on it as a miracle, accepting Bob as he was, and detaching in a healthy way. I think this is an important point for all trauma survivors and their families: Let the people who love the holiday celebrate it, and the people for whom it brings pain don't have to. This may cause problems with the extended family or the kids, but treating the survivor with respect is one healing way to frame it: "We have to respect other people's feelings and limits," can be a healthy way to put it.

We can also create our own ways of celebrating the holidays. We don't have to conform to a rigid commercial stereotype of piles of expensive gifts and big gatherings. As a matter of fact one thing that trauma can bring you face to face with is the value of people as opposed to things. We're starting a tradition in our crowd this year (a number of whom

are trauma survivors and veterans) of homemade, recycled, or under \$5 gifts. Ingenuity and fun!

Many survivors are not comfortable in crowds or at parties, but a quiet meaningful celebration, say singing carols in the living room with just the tree lights on, may be something they can participate in. They may not want to trim the tree, but going out to cut it down or pick it out may be okay. I am mentioning Christmas traditions here because that is what I grew up with, but I'm sure that Hanukkah and Kwanzaa celebrations can be as low-keyed and spiritual as the survivor needs them to be.

Survivors may need to create new rituals to help in their healing. For instance a veteran who lost friends in combat on Christmas may want to feed the homeless (many of whom are combat veterans) instead of participating in a big family dinner with people who may or may not appreciate his service. He may need to go to a special place and tell his lost buddies how much he misses them and wishes they had lived. Someone else may want to help provide Christmas presents for children of poor families or for other survivors of trauma. The range of possibilities is limited only by the imagination.

If all you want to do is stay drunk or stoned through the holidays, it might be good to find help instead. No one wants to be providing traumatic memories for the next generation. What you do while drunk or stoned can be pretty unpleasant for others, and especially painful for family members of both the spouse variety and the small-fry variety. 12 step meetings happen even on holidays like Christmas and New Year's. I'm going to be at my ACOA meeting Christmas Eve. Sobriety is better than big presents. Harder, too.

Crass commercialization and shop till you drop take the fun out of the holiday for me. So does having religion shoved down my throat, but I find that I can celebrate the birth of a child who represents all children to me and use it as an opportunity for me to do good in the world. Perhaps you and your family can do the same.

Holiday Helps: Asking for input and creating family traditions:

As I mentioned before, when Jack was a kid, he and I had our own Christmas without making Bob participate. This is called politeness, although my principal reason was selfishness, wanting my kind of Christmas. Selfishness created a healthy boundary in that case.

Something I didn't think of at the time was asking for input, which is also polite. *Rituals For Our Times*, by Evan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts (Harper, 1992, \$12.00) has a wonderful chapter on holidays and a whole section called "Making Meaningful Rituals." Among other things, they suggest that planning, discussing and getting input from family members can prevent disappointments. Planning small changes in existing family traditions instead of trying to change everything at once is also easier.

Sometimes family traditions are out of balance and only please one side of the family or one spouse or whatever. To fix this, ask what the other person would like to do for the holidays. Say something like: "Maybe we could figure out some new things we could do

that we would all like and could do together. Then the kids and I could do the stuff we like without pushing you to be involved."

Your spouse may never have thought about what he or she would like to do. I suggest not expecting an answer right away-maybe not even till next year. Just let him or her know you are interested in discussing it and open to change. People resist doing things they haven't been involved in. Planning or contributing to an event can give them a sense of being valued and having some control.

One final point, without them being aware of it, some traditional activities may clash with issues of safety for survivors. For instance, if Vince Veteran never puts up the Christmas lights despite endless nagging, perhaps it is because in Vietnam the night belonged to Charlie. By lighting up the house at night, he is attracting attention to his nearest and dearest, the kind of attention that could get you killed in Vietnam. Bringing this to consciousness--the need to keep the family safe--may help him get such a natural need met in a more appropriate way--like buying new tires for the car or better locks for the doors. Examining your traditions with that in mind can be rewarding.

Let go of outdated traditions or modify them to suit today. With or without the help of your survivor, you can sit down with whoever else in the family wants to celebrate. Have each person list what is fun for him or her. Do the things everyone likes doing. Let go of what has become a burden or what you think others should do or you should do. You can always go back to doing something if you miss it! Example: I like filling stockings for everyone and I thought they should fill mine. Now I get my own stocking stuffers. It is a lot of fun getting a stocking full of stuff I really like instead of an empty one full of hard feelings. I've also dropped creamed onions, cornbread dressing and mince pie!

Discussing what the family might like to do can be empowering for your children because it gives them a chance to move on to more age appropriate activities as they grow up. This may be hard for the parents, but I suggest that you can hang your own stockings or have your own quiet holiday dinner.

Some new family traditions you might try:

Looking up at the stars can be a beautiful experience of the glory of nature. According to December's Discover magazine, this December [1997] the sky is going to be swarming with planets at twilight. "Every bright 'star' to the left of the sunset is a planet... This is a show that airs before prime time, so observe early. After 9 PM only Saturn remains... This year the natural holiday lights are on display for even the youngest of Earth's appreciative sky watchers."

Get out of the house: Making snow angels is one of my favorite pastimes. There is nothing that helps me recreate the feeling of being a happy kid again like falling over backwards into the snow and waving my arms and legs. Too bad it never snows in Florida! Snow men, snowball fights (no ice balls, please), snow forts, snowy walks, cross country skiing, sledding, ice skating all can be family fun activities. In the south, walks in

the woods, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, bicycle rides are still options.

Decorating with natural materials is another thing I like to do. Grapevine wreaths with gold or silver pinecones, magnolia cones, acorns, berries and any weird seed pods I can find give me a sense of satisfaction no store bought wreath ever brought. Look around and be inventive. I also have a wreath made of rusty barbwire which my friend Marci gave me. As a survivor, she feels a little Scroogey at Christmas. I like it!

Recycled and home made decorations (and gifts) bring family members together, minimize the wastage of natural resources, and increase our own resourcefulness and independence in a healthy creative way. For some of us it is important not to contribute to corporate profits. Paper chains and pomanders (oranges covered with cloves) are great home made decorations. Buying cloves in bulk at an oriental grocery store or a health food store makes pomanders affordable. They smell great!

Doing stuff for others. One veteran I know has been feeding the homeless for the last nine years on holidays.

I buy books to contribute to the local newspaper's Christmas book giving program for disadvantaged kids. This is a living amends to a poor little girl to whom Jack wanted to give one of his books when he was 5. I wouldn't let him.

Battered women's shelters always need stuff as do homeless shelters, nursing homes, hospitals and churches.

You can adopt a family if you are well off, or contribute a few cans of food or a toy if you are not. Whatever you give will benefit you as well as those you help. Altruistic people actually are healthier than those who are not!

You can do any of these as a memorial to someone who was lost or abused.

Doing stuff for yourself: Provide yourself with something you didn't get that you needed. Maybe this is a grown woman buying her inner child a Barbie doll, maybe it is a veteran presenting himself with a certificate of thanks for his service. Look inside. People who love you would like to do this for you, too. Let them know if they can help somehow.

Ask people what you could get them within your price range. Tell people what you want. Talking about presents is hard for some of us. I thought I should be able to find the perfect present with no input. Now I ask. I used to expect Bob to know what I liked and wanted. Now I give him guidelines.

Our crowd is having a homemade, recycled or under \$5.00 Christmas again. We gave each other some really funny presents last year. If someone has given you something expensive you hated, this year you can recycle it to someone who might like it. I get wonderful containers at garage sales and fill them with cookies or rum balls or spiced pecans so it is homemade and recycled!

Talk to each other: Go for the quiet evening at home together. Many of us never sit down and talk because we are so swept away in the demands of daily living. Make a date and simply talk. What about? About what the holidays and/or the family means to you.

Accept the fact that kids are naturally self-centered and needy but can develop great kindness. A parents job is not to suppress these natural characteristics, but to encourage awareness of others and empathy. People used to think small children were little demons, but they are actually very kind and willing to give of themselves and help others. One great family tradition is to tell them that some little kids need toys and help them weed out ones they want to give away.

Give each child something that will give him or her a feeling of specialness. It needn't be expensive. Magic markers and a pad of paper gave Jack many wonderful hours of fun. I still treasure his creations.!

Happy Holidays

Patience Mason

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