

ASK ERICA

Erica J. Burns, M.A.

Christmas Need Not Be Stressful

Ah, the holidays are upon us. I was thinking about writing about holiday stress and how to manage it. We might do things like “remember to breathe”, “make time to rest” and “don't sweat the small stuff.” All of these are helpful, but they led me to think more about the meaning of the Christmas holiday and ideas about how to incorporate that into our lives. I realized that simply doing that, focussing on the meaning of Christmas, rather than all the “I gotta do this” things, could greatly reduce the stress we create for ourselves.

So here are some of my ramblings.... No matter what else you are doing, make the time to think about what Christ's messages were. If you are a practicing Christian, you probably already honor the day by attending church and focussing on it as the anniversary of the birth of Christ. If you are not a Christian, but you celebrate the cultural holiday of Christmas, you can still appreciate what Jesus stood for, among other things, love, compassion, grace and peace.

One of the biggest stressors people tend to put on themselves at this holiday season is shopping and buying gifts for family and friends. In this economy this can be even more anxiety producing than usual. But maybe this is a golden opportunity to really do it differently. Perhaps this year you might only give one gift to the people you hold dear and then plan to give small tokens of love every month throughout the year on the 25th along with a ritual honoring the meaning of Christ's messages. Gifts don't have to be objects. They can be a poem, a prayer, a song or dance, a coupon to do some favor or chore for someone else, a meal, special time spent with someone or a great big hug.

When I was a child one of my favorite things in December was an advent calendar. It was a big brightly colored picture with lots of little doors to open. Each door had a number from 1 to 25 and behind each door was a picture of something, usually things like a doll, or a candy cane and then on the 25th a bigger picture usually of the nativity scene. I was thinking how fun it would be to make an advent calendar, especially with your children, but behind each door might be a message related to what Christ taught, such as “be kind to others”, “don't be jealous of another's good fortune”, “love thy neighbor as thyself”. You could make a game out of this with your children, asking them what they think Jesus wanted for people. Then this could be kept and used in future years.

Other compassionate, loving, grace-filled things you might do at this season would be to make a gift and give it anonymously, again including your children in the process. You could sit down with your children and give thanks for all the real gifts that have been given to you and that you may take for granted everyday, fresh air, clean running water, enough to eat. You might put this in writing, creatively shape it into a wreath and hang it on your front door. You could find an organization or a cause that would welcome your caring, and your talents and donate some time to them. You would have time to do these sorts of things if you were spending less time hanging lights, putting up trees, planning gatherings, and shopping, wrapping and shipping gifts.

Another arena where we tend to experience stress is in our celebrations and our visits with family, especially if/when we go “home” to visit them. One of the biggest causes of that stress is our

expectations. Plan to be realistic. There are no perfect family gatherings, perfect gifts, perfect decorations, perfect parties, let alone perfect people. Allow others to be as they are, not expecting or insisting that they be otherwise. Make a conscious decision to practice tolerance and acceptance of others, your loved ones, as well as, the clerks in the stores, the waiters and waitresses, the airline personnel and all the other people you encounter. They, just like you, are hoping for a happy holiday as well. Do your very best to not judge them.

Remember to play. I think what most of us as adults really like about the Christmas season is how it reminds us of the fun parts of our childhoods. The sparkly lights, the colorful wrappings, the activities which only happen once a year. So be a kid again. Do those fun things whether or not you have children, go sledding or tubing, bake cookies, make a snowman, go caroling and let yourself enjoy the pleasures of this season.

It may not be easy to change your traditions, to simplify your rituals and to focus on what the real meaning of this season is, but the rewards can be immense. Change your focus and see if it alleviates your emotional, financial and interpersonal stress.

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