

Uniting as a Couple to Deal With the Holiday Stress

Infertility is demanding and stressful. The holidays are demanding and stressful. Put them together and one plus one equals much more than two. At the same time, the holidays provide two opportunities to turn the marital relationship into a refuge, despite the sound of jingle bells.

In the best of families, tensions abound at holiday time. The milieu for get-togethers may have to do with who expects what, who can't stand whom, whose house is center stage, whose traditions "win", who's impossible to buy presents for and who's jealous of what. And of course, a separate and very big fly in the ointment is who will be there with babies.

This does not mean that all families are looney toons. It does mean, however, that even in the steadiest of families, things cannot ever be perfect - and - you are not likely to be in the mood for anyone's imperfections.

Then add a complication: If people know what you are going through, they may not know what to say and, though well-meaning, may say the wrong thing. But what if no one in your family knows what you are dealing with? While keeping the secret may be the lesser of two evils, it still creates additional stress for you.

Creating a united front is one way to create a refuge. You may be in total agreement about what you need, and your families may have the flexibility to respect it. But what if the needs of you and your spouse are not congruent? What if one or both of you are afraid to violate tradition?

The Chinese character for crisis is a combination of the characters for danger and opportunity. It may feel dangerous to set a limit to one or both families who want their traditions perpetuated. Anticipating feelings of guilt for violating tradition can feel as bad as complying with expectations from which you want to escape. Yet, you are entitled to feeling entitled to claiming what you need, especially under these circumstances.

This is an important opportunity for you to define your "coupleness." As married adults, it is your job, and it is your right to let both families know what boundaries you need in place for your well-being. It is highly recommended that if you cannot come to terms together with the gravitational force of the point of view of your respective families, that you seek the guidance of a therapist in order to gain clarity and resolution. The last thing that you need is to feel divided and conquered.

Whether on your own or with professional help, if you successfully decide and declare what your decisions about the holidays are, you set yourselves up to minimize the impact of family/holiday stress on your minds and bodies at a time when mind/body equanimity is so important.

Learning to reverse the physiology of stress is the second opportunity to create a refuge. It is no longer in dispute that both the mental and physical experiences of stress land in the body. That would be counterproductive.

Furthermore, in this society, many of us live in a state of red alert, tolerating high levels of stress as a matter of routine. While there are many who need to learn how to manage stress as much as you do, few need to learn how more than you.

Uniting as a couple with the intention to explore techniques of mind/body relaxation that you can enjoy together is a valuable way to spend some time. Reducing mind/body stress clears a space to experience your love and compassion for each other in a fuller way. Feeling loved and understood is palliative and reduces the stress even more.

As hectic as the holiday time can be, you can mindfully work together to identify the approaches which would most take the edge off of this frenzied time. It does not matter whether you achieve relief from mind/body stress by going in through the body "door" with a yoga or tai chi class for couples, for instance, or through the mind "door" with a guided imagery tape or any other meditative experience that you can do together. By relaxing the body, you can break the mental grip - and vice versa.

(Refer to the Grab Bag article above for more ideas.)

Infertility is nasty. But the silver lining in the cloud is that as a couple, you can and should put your needs front and center. It may seem necessary to insulate yourselves from family events. And creating your own sanctuary in which you can practice techniques which reverse the physiology of stress helps to keep your love for one another front and center and can soften the arduous journey toward your goal.

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