

Home For The Holidays: The Realities
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

The holidays are the time of the year when Americans most think about spending time with extended family. We seem to be engaged in a huge conspiratorial collusion of "shoulds" that demand that individuals and nuclear families take to the roads and skies for the yearly pilgrimage in search of the "perfect family holiday". While visions of Norman Rockwell paintings dance through our collective heads, a nagging memory of what family holidays have really been like offsets excitement and joy.

The difference between what we think the holidays should be like and the reality of holidays past can create a sense of longing, sadness, and resentment. Many people grieve the loss of the fantasy of "the holidays", either as something gone that once was, or of something that never was. With only about 4% of American families representing the Ozzie and Harriet household, most people's experience with the family "shoulds" of the holidays fall short.

Patterns of unhappy or chaotic holiday experiences can come with the territory of families of divorce, addiction, chronic physical and mental illness, extreme poverty, and abuse. Some people experience the holidays with the sadness of recent or not so recent loss. Christmas songs, eggnog, cooking smells, holiday decorations, well wishes, and even some seemingly insignificant events brings about a flood of memories with sadness, yearning, and loss.

Other folks that have had a history of great holidays with their nuclear families, find themselves feeling sad, lonely, and angry that the "grownup kids", now fully launched into the world, who won't be "coming home for Christmas". Many people separated by geography and the realities of work, family, and person responsibilities that won't allow for going home for the holidays also find themselves grieving the loss of that "sense of home", with its emotional connection and support. Even though many couples and their families deliberately make a choice of which set of in-laws to visit, individual spouses still miss "their family".

Other people, for survival sake, choose to stay home. In order to maintain their own addiction recovery or emotional wellbeing, many will choose to avoid their families of origin during the holidays. Addiction and many mental health problems tend to run in families. Those suffering from addiction or mental health problems might

otherwise find themselves returning to an extremely stressful and potential dangerous situation by going home for the holidays. The choice to protect one's recovery by staying away does not exempt them from the sadness or sense of loss that comes from the fantasy of what "should be".

Regardless of whether there is obvious dysfunction in the family of origin, a certain amount of stress is usually involved in going home for the holidays. For many families, it does not matter that you are 35, 47, or 55, you are still someone's "child", baby sister or brother, or "little Jimmy". It is so easy to fall back into old roles that you have occupied in the past. It can be quite difficult to break out of your old childhood role or identity. However, new roles and relationships as "equals" can be developed with perseverance and assertiveness. As adults attempt to show their competence and emotional maturity by moving from childlike demands to taking responsibility for self, other family members' perceptions tend to be colored by history and memory. The person trying to establish himself/herself as an adult "peer" may have some events from the past to live down before accomplishing this feat. Memories of past inappropriate behavior may live on forever. Whatever the "realities" of one's "home for the holidays" history, there are some particularly helpful tools that adults can use to make this year's "home for the holidays" better.

One tool that can be particularly helpful is to keep your visit short. The longer that you are with your family of origin, the more likely that you are to revert to old childhood roles and interactions. Another tool is to take one step back from your family system to view it with detachment. Look for the patterns in interactions and how predictably the events unfold. I don't remember who said it first, but I have repeated it for decades – "families have more games than Parker Brothers." Look for the games in the family. If you identify games that hurt, where you can't win, and where you leave feeling sad and hurt, don't play. Have an escape plan. When you find yourself being pulled back into old dysfunctional games, you can make your escape, even if only briefly (i.e., going to the store), calm down, regroup, and make conscious decisions about how to deal with what is going on in the here and now.

The most helpful tool of all is to keep your expectations realistic. If Uncle Joe gets drunk and falls down every year, he will probably do the same thing this year. If your sister hates whatever you buy her for Christmas, expect the same thing again this year—regardless of

what you get. By keeping your expectations realistic, you may be able to enjoy the people in your life for the people they are, rather than the people you would like them to be. To feel accepted by the people you love is a great gift, in and of itself.

One more tip for the road: do something considerate for those who are grieving, lonely, sad, and even angry during the holidays. Someday you may need the favor returned.

Reference: The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through The Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity, (e-book), Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D., 2009, Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, OK., www.peggyferguson.com