HOLIDAY HAPPINESS AND THE COMPANY YOU KEEP

With whom do you plan to spend the holidays? Whether it is with your family, someone else's, with friends or alone, you could find yourself stressed and disappointed, or relaxed and satisfied. Here are some suggestions to enhance sometimes complicated relationships during this holiday season.

Surviving the Holidays and In-Laws

Do you and your spouse/partner find yourselves spending more time commuting from in-law to in-law, rather than relaxing and sipping hot cider, because you feel guilt and pressure to spend equal time with each family? Does one of you bend over backwards to prove yourself to your spouse's family, but end up with feelings of resentment? Do you find that personality conflicts spoil family get-togethers? Here are some suggestions:

1. Work out a visit plan with your spouse/mate before the holidays arrive, after you've asked yourselves these questions: Which holidays do you want to spend alone, and which with extended family? Which family customs are you willing to change, combine, or delete? Can your in-laws tell you their preferences for holiday events especially important to them, or when they'd most like to see you?

2. When hosting, provide opportunities for in-laws to contribute to the event in some way. This will give them a sense of ownership and take some pressure off you.

3. Rather than clinging to what is customary or routine, try something new. Suggest gathering at a restaurant, or shift from a family sit-down meal to an outing or open house style gathering.

4. Limit alcohol, as it can exacerbate frayed nerves, and steer clear of "hot" topics such as money or politics. Plan an activity that everyone can enjoy together, such as playing a game or volunteering at a soup kitchen.

5. Practice relaxation: breathe deeply and often. Go out for fresh air. Take a walk. Take a nap. Sing or watch a comedy.

Alone During the Holidays? Join the Crowd

For many people who won't be surrounded by loved ones during this time of year for a variety of reasons - recent separation or divorce, death, travel, or simply because they live in different parts of the country - media portrayals of cozy holiday gatherings can add to a sense of isolation. Some degree of loneliness is normal, during the holidays or at any time, and there's nothing abnormal about having the "holiday blues," which are more a mood than any sort of lasting condition. Dwelling on the sense of loneliness, however, can make a person feel worse. Craig Ellison, Ph.D., director of the Alliance Graduate School of Counseling in Nyack, NY, states that many people don't take care of their relationships throughout the year, and suddenly feel at a loss when the holidays come around. He suggests that relationships are not cemented during the holidays, and it is not realistic to expect that the season will result in spontaneous healing. Good relationships take time.

Happy Holidays
1.800.451.1834
Blended Families: Seven Tips to Minimize Stress

1. **Recognize that holidays will not be the same** – Trying to pretend that divorce, separation or remarriage won’t affect the holiday will create tremendous stress and conflict.

2. **Plan ahead and discuss everyone’s expectations** – By airing problems and concerns ahead of time, you and your family can avoid last-minute squabbles and actively involve everyone in planning a memorable holiday.

3. **Start new traditions and take lots of pictures** – This is the time to build memories and establish a sense of identity for your reconstituted family by looking for a meaningful new tradition that will pull everyone together. Consider a community service project for the entire family.

4. **Look for common interests** – Blended families may combine children who vary greatly in age and interests. Look for things that the whole family can enjoy together, whether that’s a drive to see holiday decorations or an evening of ice skating.

5. **Allow for alone time** – Don’t think that you have to do everything together. Allow time for people to go their separate ways and enjoy individual interests or friends.

6. **Work toward smoothing transitions for children** – If children will be traveling between households, they need to know what to expect. Prepare them ahead of time, don’t wait for them to ask questions. Create a calendar which details these plans.

7. **Maintain a sense of humor and stay flexible** – Some things will go wrong, and that’s okay. Perfection is not the goal. In fact, this year’s holiday disaster may well be a source of laughter next year. Prepare backup activities, such as board games and fun rented movies.

Keeping expectations realistic is key to maintaining a sense of satisfaction during the holiday season – no matter who you plan to be with.

For more information on handling holiday stress, or to speak to a counselor, contact your EAP professional at 1.800.451.1834.

Material for this flyer extracted from website articles by Barbara Loera and Laurie Stoneham, at drkoop.com, and Christine P. Martin, at Lifescape.com.