

Coping with the Holiday Season

by Elizabeth A. Grill, Psy. D.

Coping with the holiday season, with its emphasis on children and family can be one of the most difficult challenges for couples and individuals struggling with infertility. The holiday season emphasizes the celebration of birth (of Jesus and of the New Year), the celebration of miracles (like the oil of the temple which lasted eight days, in Hanukah) and the celebration of family. For infertility patients who are waiting for a birth that has yet to occur, for a miracle of their own and for the creation of a family that has not yet materialized, this time of year may be particularly painful. People are bombarded with commercialized images of blissful children and beaming parents. These picture perfect scenes further estrange couples coping with infertility, merely reminding them of what they desire more than anything but do not yet have. So instead of feeling uplifted and included in holiday festivities, individuals often feel depressed and alienated from others which only serves to add guilt to their pre-existing pain. The following is a list of suggestions for getting through the season.

Coping at Family Gatherings

Dealing with family can be one of the most difficult parts of the holiday season. Often, well-intended family members feel entitled to touch on private and painful areas with intrusive questions and “professional” advice. Family gatherings almost always involve children and/or the unsolicited announcement of a new pregnancy. These factors can result in couples withdrawing and avoiding family gatherings because they trigger the loss and grief associated with infertility that many family members do not understand.

Some suggestions:

- **Limit your participation in family celebrations.** If your family’s holiday traditions include children opening presents, you may want to come at the end of the gift-opening or skip it altogether. If you want to limit the time and exposure to potential inquisitions from others, go for dessert but skip dinner.
- **Give yourself protective space.** If you plan to travel to spend the holidays with your family, consider staying in a hotel or with friends rather than with your parents or siblings in a home where all activities will focus on the needs and interests of children.
- **Consider some degree of openness about your infertility.** If you think you might be ready to share your experiences with family members, this could be the right time. You might speak to one or two members ahead of time and let them spread the word or simply answer probing questions honestly.
- **Schedule time with children you really care about.** Arrange to take the nieces and nephews that you are especially close with to a special movie or out to lunch so that you can enjoy them and your relationship away from the family and its "public" child-focused activities.

Preparation for Getting Through the Season

It may be valuable for you and your partner to walk through your entire holiday season in your minds. You should realize that family, friends, and even those whom you have never met will probably ask insensitive questions. If you have anticipated a question and rehearsed a response, you are less likely to be stunned and more likely to be able to answer quickly and change the subject.

Some suggestions:

- **Talk with family and friends ahead of time.** If you have told others about your experience with infertility, you may want to guide them by telling them what they can discuss openly and what you would prefer that they keep private. You may even want to explain to family and friends that you may leave early, come late or go for a walk if things become too overwhelming.
- **Set personal boundaries.** Anticipate the questions that you will be asked and come up with one or two standard answers that you can provide family members that will hopefully make it clear that you do not wish to discuss the topic. For example, when someone asks, “When are you going to have children?” You can respond, “We’re working on it” or “When there is news to share you will know”.
- **Choose family and friends wisely.** Be aware of who is capable of being understanding and supportive and increase your time with those people. Reduce your time with those who cannot provide the support that you need during this difficult time. You may be surprised to find that those you have always relied on for comfort may not be the same people that you turn to during this particular crisis in your life.
- **Decide to take this year off.** If you don’t feel that there are any constructive ways to prepare yourself or others to make the events more enjoyable then ask yourself if it is really necessary for you to be there. If you are feeling particularly depleted or vulnerable, there is nothing wrong with giving yourself permission to protect and take care of yourself. It is okay to say, "No, we really can't make it this year."

Shopping for Holiday Gifts

Shopping malls filled with masses of pregnant women and excited children sitting on Santa’s lap for holiday pictures are terrible places for people struggling with infertility. There are plenty of things you can do to avoid shopping side by side with large families and excited kids.

Some suggestions:

- **Boutiques and Specialty Stores.** Try shopping at smaller boutiques instead of crowded malls. You may find unique and unusual gifts and more attentive sales people to help with creative gift ideas.
- **Catalogs and Internet.** You can buy just about anything from a catalog or on the Internet today and avoid the craziness of shopping in stores during the holiday

season. Some catalogs and websites even feature items that are not available in the actual stores.

- **Homemade Gifts.** Explore your creative side with baking or arts and craft gift ideas. Not only will you avoid shopping all together but you might actually find the creative outlet to be therapeutic during this difficult time.
- **Don't shop.** Perhaps you can contribute to a joint gift or provide the funds and let your mother or brother do the shopping? Or, simply give money or a gift certificate and allow others to choose exactly what they want for the holiday season.

Change Your Focus

There is not much point in trying to force yourself to enjoy the traditional holiday, as you've always known it. During this life crisis, you may want to consider changing your focus to make the season better suit you.

Some suggestions:

- **Change the focus of the celebration.** If you have a birthday or anniversary during the winter, spend some time planning to make that the high point of the season. If not, plan a special celebration of a different public holiday such as an adults-only New Year's party or brunch or a Valentine's getaway weekend.
- **Create new and personal rituals.** Consider establishing a personal and private ritual or tradition that enhances your relationship and allows you to give to each other. It can be a special present, dinner at a restaurant inappropriate for children, a night with childless or single friends, a weekend at a romantic inn or an island resort or simply a romantic night at home for just the two of you. Plan things that you can look forward to and do things that you know you won't be able to do when you have a small child.
- **Pamper yourself.** Do whatever makes you happy. Spend an evening in front of the fire, take a long bubble bath, get a massage, light a scented candle or take a day off to read a book completely unrelated to infertility. Whatever lifts your spirits, do it, as a gift to yourself.
- **Do something nice for someone else.** Sometimes helping others can help you forget about your own troubles for a while and create a new ritual for the holiday season. Volunteer in a soup kitchen or shelter, take cookies to a nursing home, buy presents for a child whose holiday would otherwise be bleak, or invite a lonely neighbor for your holiday meal.

Communicate with your partner

The crisis of infertility can be a tremendous strain for any couple. It is very common for one member of a couple, typically the male, to want to do the usual holiday activities as a couple while the other partner, typically the female finds this prospect painful. If you find that the two of you are having difficulties communicating, you may also wish to consider professional counseling with an infertility counselor.

Some suggestions:

- **Play on the same team.** Try and approach holiday decision-making by reminding yourselves that you are ultimately on the same team. Create a language (either verbal or nonverbal) for just the two of you so that when you are with others, you can signal to your partner when you need to leave or take a break. Have a well defined plan worked out ahead of time so that you don't feel stuck. Some examples are calling or paging your partner from a private area, squeezing his/her hand three times, or coughing out loud.
- **Use Communication and Empathy.** Don't lock your feelings inside. Share with your partner how these holidays are affecting you. Together you can make it through. Try to begin understanding your partner's feelings. You don't have to agree with your partner, but see if you can put yourself in his/her shoes. Then, see if you can find ways to compromise so that both of you can fulfill your holiday desires.

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Dr. Grill is experienced as a counseling psychologist and medical researcher and provides individual, couple and group therapy for infertility patients. Trained and certified at the Mind/Body Institute at Harvard Medical School, Dr. Grill also developed and conducts a stress management class for infertility patients.

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