



Finding Joy and Fostering Connection During Hard Holidays



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Maybe it's because my parents, as well as my husband's parents, are divorced. Maybe it's because we're old enough now that we've grieved the passing of nearly all of our grandparents and a good number of dear, old friends besides. Maybe it's because we have children who are nearly "grown and flown." Maybe it's seasonal affective disorder (we do live in the Northeast, after all). Maybe it's some combination of all of these things and still more . . . but the winter holidays can be really bittersweet for me. I used to be ashamed to admit that, but that shame doesn't serve anyone. Shame keeps us disconnected.

I know from conversations with friends and colleagues that I'm not alone in this experience—that many of them also struggle during a season that is touted as the hap-happiest time of the year. Distance from loved ones (whether geographical or emotional), personal and financial struggles and strain, the strife in the world, and even the sheer pressure of seasonal expectations can leave us aching at a time known for its warmth and togetherness.

When we're feeling the holiday blues most keenly, it can be tempting to draw back into ourselves, particularly if we're the kind of people who find some measure of comfort in solitude (and I want to be clear that self-care and intentional solitude both can be supremely important). But what solitude can't offer is community and collective memory-making. The kind that can help to restore some of the cheer that sadness and stress sap from the season. The kind that can help to remind us all not to miss connecting meaningfully with the people who matter to us most . . . not to let the here-and-now moments pass us by.

With all of this in mind, here are just a few memory-making ideas for fostering connection and finding joy as we face the upcoming, sometimes-hard winter holidays together.

Get (pot)Lucky

Gathering everyone together for a holiday potluck can be a warm and welcoming way to build community, especially when we approach it with sensitivity and curiosity. Encourage attendees to bring dishes that reflect their personal traditions, inviting storytelling and shared experiences. Learning the stories behind the recipes others hold dear is a way to keep our cherished cultures and our loved ones at the centerpiece of our festivities.

Cozy Up

Setting up a cozy corner filled with simple pleasures in our staff room or classroom, stocked with small snacks, mixes for warm drinks, and cozy blankets can be a real comfort. Consider adding soft music and a little area for piecing together puzzles. That way, people who would like to can interact together without disturbing the peacefulness of the space.

Make Kindness Count

Promoting a kindness challenge throughout the holiday season and encouraging everyone in your group to participate can pay forward long after the winter holidays have come and gone. While these kinds of challenges could include organized events such as drives for nonperishables, toys, or warm clothing, it's important to recognize the lasting impact of small acts. Lending someone a helping hand or leaving someone an encouraging note can make a world of difference.

Circle 'Round

Acknowledging that some may find the season a difficult one can foster understanding and empathy. Consider hosting a discussion circle where colleagues can share their feelings and experiences without judgment. Remember that a simple one-to-one check-in can also go a long way, and reach out to colleagues or students who may seem withdrawn or in need of support. A short, caring message is sometimes all it takes to remind others that they are not alone.

During the holiday season, we can find ourselves caught in a swirl of mixed and conflicting emotions, but with ideas like those mentioned and so many others, we can foreground the more positive ones. Cultivating an atmosphere of kindness and connection during the holiday season can be as simple as reminding everyone that they are remembered, valued, and appreciated. Supportive connections are a gift. One that we can offer each other at the holidays and all the year through.

The holidays can intensify feelings of loneliness and despair. If you or someone you know is struggling, there are resources that can help. The NAMI HelpLine is staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Call 1-800-950-6264, text "helpline" to 62640, or chat online.