

Dividing the Holidays: Deciding Where To Spend The Holidays

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Let the games begin. Negotiating with your spouse and your respective families of origin about where you will spend Thanksgiving and Christmas can be tricky and can try the patience, tolerance, and communication skills of anyone.

While it seems that your family of origin knows the “right” way to celebrate the holidays and that other families do things very strangely, you are actually comparing your own familiar family culture to others’ family cultures. Just as other families’ ways of doing things seem stranger, keep in mind that your family culture may seem equally as stranger to others.

As you try to problem solve about where to spend the holidays, keep in mind that your family does not have the market cornered on the “right way” to spend the holidays. A fair and balanced approach will have you taking into account both families of origin and their family traditions when deciding on where to spend the holidays. Alternately, it may also be the appropriate time and circumstance to develop your own family traditions and/or to spend the holidays at home.

The holidays are stressful enough without spreading yourself too thin and trying to please everyone. Often, no matter what choices you make, or how hard you try to make things equitable and fair, someone’s feelings will be hurt. Attempting to please everyone is a no-win situation. The decisions that you make about where to spend the holidays should also take into account the “stress factor”, the “expense factor”, and the “time/energy factor”. While you might really want to travel 700 miles north in the intemperate weather to visit your parents for the two days you have off from work, a more realistic solution might be to visit them another time when you don’t spend half of your time traveling.

Close proximity presents even more of a dilemma. If your family and your spouse’s family live relatively close, you may have historically tried to drag your small children around from house to house making the rounds on Christmas Day, while what you really want to do is stay home and enjoy the kids playing with their Christmas presents.

Pro-active problem solving can be applied to this universal, age-old dilemma. Make a list of things/activities/events/feelings that you want to experience during the holidays. Together with your spouse, decide which ones rank the highest in importance and seek to find the best solution for your needs and desires. Make decisions that set the stage

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to have the kind of holidays that you want to experience. Couples whose idea of a well spent Christmas involves lots of activities and big fun might choose to go to the family home in the city where there are many activities to choose from. If you want to watch a particular football game, you might want to spend the holiday with the family that enjoys football and will probably be watching it. If you want to rest and relax, the family that eats dinner and falls asleep on the couch might be an appropriate choice. If you want to go hunting during deer season, it seems an obvious solution to go to the family's farm (and the traditional deer hunting event) for Thanksgiving and to spend Christmas with the other family. Both spouses should be able to get something that they want. Negotiate. Compromise. Flexibility is the order of the day.

Long standing family traditions carry a lot of emotional weight. Even though challenging those traditions will often be met with resistance, it *probably* won't get you disowned. When you make decisions about where to spend the holidays that do not match family of origin expectations, some effort should be expended to smooth hurt feelings, and to reassure family members that this decision does not mean that they are not loved or that they are not important. If it is possible or feasible, think of ways that you can engage them in the problem solving process. Family members can more easily get over hurt feelings when they are not developing extreme explanations in the absence of real information. The point is, that even though you have done things a certain way for a long time, you can still negotiate for change and do something that suits your needs better. When changing up holiday routines, communication will help smooth the way for acceptance of those changes by your families of origin. Never blame your spouse for not spending a particular holiday at your family's house. Start early. Talk and listen. Reassure your family members that they are important and that you love them.



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While this ebook was written especially for people in addiction recovery, it has helpful hints, tips, activities, and worksheets that would be beneficial for anyone experiencing holiday stress.

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www.peggyferguson.com

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