



Keeping Your Marriage Healthy During the Holidays

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As we find ourselves in the midst of yet another Christmas season, we are reminded of the many intensified challenges facing married couple at this time of the year. These challenges--ranging all the way from time over-commitment and financial pressure to unrealistic expectations--often have an extremely negative impact on the marriages. If one or both partners have negative home-of-origin issues tied to the holiday season (such as growing up in an alcoholic home where things got even "crazier" during the holiday party season), the mere mention of Christmas can activate the hurtful memory "tapes" of past years.

In short, now is a good time to ask a very important question: "What can we do as a married couple to stay emotionally and spiritually connected during this busy season?" The failure of couples to be proactive in managing the holiday season is one of the reasons that marriage counselors have a predictable spike in business right after the holidays. For many years, I have seen a huge increase in "crisis-mode" counseling calls right after January 1. Unmet (and often unrealistic) expectations are often the key issue.

When it come to the Christmas observance, my wife (Carol) and I came from very different homes. She grew up in a small family (only one brother), and her family went "all out" for Christmas giving, decorating, parties, etc. It was a time of fun and youthful wonderment. By contrast, I grew up in a family of seven children, and my parents were the publishers of the local newspaper. Our Christmas season was an absolute "zoo," as the entire newspaper staff (and much our family) geared up for the sale of countless holiday greeting ads, increased space devoted to news, etc. It was "stress city." Thus, my childhood Christmas memories are a mixed bag—good memories of decorating the exterior of our big family home and negative memories of having totally "stressed out" parents. Then came my own career experience with Christmas—practicing law and then being involved in congregational ministry. In both professions, the Christmas season for many years was "overload" time for us—planning and executing special events, tax-driven year-end legal deadlines, etc.

After many years of just "enduring" the Christmas season, and to some degree really missing the joy of celebrating the gift of Christ, Carol and I gradually integrated some very helpful changes into our holiday planning. From that experience we offer the following tips on how to stay "connected" with your marriage partner during the holiday season:

- Have a family plan for the Christmas season—this requires taking a hard look at what the season is really about, what you want your children to learn about Christmas, and how you will allocate your time.
- Establish annual traditions that focus on something besides lavish intra-family giving and over-eating. For example, we know two families who have gone to Mexico the last two years around Christmastime to take gifts to orphanages and befriend the children there. On a smaller scale, you might consider being a blessing to some family who has less than yours right here at home.
- If you have children and want to spend some time shopping for them, try to make that a “we” event for you and your spouse. For several years, Carol and I found babysitters, went across town, rented a motel room near a shopping center, and converted the shopping “ordeal” into something very good.
- Be intentional about staying emotionally connected during the holidays. This requires staying current on holiday stressors (by interviewing your mate on a regular basis) and going out of your way to show non-sexual affection to one another. Carol recommends frequent “cheek” touching. A husband would probably appreciate some intentional love-making dates on the December calendar and perhaps going out to a sporting event with his bride during the holiday season.
- Stay spiritually connected by stepping up your intentionality with couple prayer time. This is a great time to ask the Lord to minister to unrealistic expectations associated with Christmas and to seek God’s wisdom on staying out of debt.
- Establish a clear budget for gift-giving and other Christmas-related expenses (decorations, party clothes, eating out, etc.). Avoid the trap of Christmas debt!
- Abandon any motive to “keep up with the Joneses” next door when it comes to gift-giving.
- Identify and pray through any family-of-origin issues associated with the Christmas season. For example, since I grew up in a small town newspaper family, I have to work hard at not going into hyper “stress mode” during this season. A person who grew up in an alcoholic home may have terrible Christmas-season memories tied to their parent’s excessive abuse of alcohol during the season of parties, spiked eggnog, “eat, drink, and be merry,” etc.
- Take a hard look at the “roles” you and your spouse have played in past Christmas seasons, and then try to enter into each other’s realms. For example, if the wife has always done all of the Christmas shopping, try to make that a shared process. If the husband has always been the outside light guy, how about the wife joining him in that project, along with any children old enough to help.