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The Holiday Clock is Ticking and Counting Down....

by Liz Ashe

From Thanksgiving through New Years, the common thought is “home for the holidays.” Then we package our expectations of a loving family and warmth, harmony, and joy for our celebrations. Folks willingly go through a great deal of effort to make the holidays merry and “perfect.”

Thanksgiving is America’s one true nonsectarian family holiday. On this day we pause to give thanks for our bounties and then hurl ourselves into a feeding frenzy. As I look back to my childhood Thanksgivings, I see a huge turkey (with all the trimmings) or a ham, two types of potato, three vegetables, cranberry sauce (two types) and rolls, followed by a choice of three different pies, and brownies, and cookies. All mega calories that I might just pick up with a spatula and slap on my hips.

We over-ate and grazed all day and into the evening. Far more food than we needed was prepared. But in that picture, I also see an exhausted mom who spent days preparing food that ended up in dozens of Tupperware containers to feed us for the rest of the week. And then there’s always the mound of dishes to wash.

If I could snap my fingers and time-warp myself back, I’d rather see and give thanks for a simple meal and have more family time. Both without parents, my husband and I can get that kind of food anywhere, but we can’t get back just “being together” with our parents.

Fortunately, I have many memories of non-holiday days in front of the fire popping popcorn, telling stories, playing card and board games and assembling jigsaw puzzles. But that was before there were computers, PlayStations or Nintendo games, Mp3 Players and DVD’s and televisions in every bedroom. The latter gives so many opportunities for the family to scatter and do their “own things” after eating.

My son’s new in-laws’ holidays always includes a great, long labored over meal, but the entire evening is devoted to indoor family games such as Pictionary. The focus of the day is on “time together.”

Wouldn’t it be great if we all could focus more on what really matters (time together) and less time on having the “perfect” dinner and holiday celebrations?

Even though commercialism has pushed it back closer to Halloween, Thanksgiving is the official kick-off day for holiday decorations in public places and for the selling season. The day after Thanksgiving remains the single most intense shopping day of the year; and it spins us into a world of feverish activity and a marathon of events that often result in

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Tips to Ease The Pressures of Gift Giving and the Toll on Pocketbooks.

1. Set a budget or spending limit and keep to it. This includes food shopping and decorating. Don’t buy more and more just to increase the pile under the tree.
2. Don’t shop without a plan or list. Impulsive gifts can be very costly.
3. Cap the number of gifts one person can give to another or use a “pick-a-name” exchange to prevent having to buy for everyone or decide to only buy for the children.
4. Consider giving coupons for your time such as for baby-sitting, animal sitting, cooking meals, cleaning house, chores etc.
5. If you’ve had a tough year financially, shrink the gift list. Suggest either not exchanging or observing lower dollar-limits.
6. Purchase gifts from thrift shops such as the Salvation Army or Goodwill stores, or other charitable organizations where proceeds go to a worthy cause
7. Don’t buy a lot for babies and children that are too young to know what is going on.
8. Don’t “over toy” the young ones. It overwhelms them and sets an expectation of quantity.
9. For those difficult to buy for folks or for those that have what they need and want, suggest that each person buy for the needy instead. There are many “gift trees” with names to choose from.
10. Write a letter or card that tells the receiver how important he or she is to you and tell them that “just being in your life” is the only gift you need.

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the nerve racking task of picking the “perfect” gift. Gift giving, according to one expert, is the most nerve wracking part of the entire season. There is always the issue of the surprise, knowing a loved one’s tastes, likes and wants, and size. Sometimes folks are disappointed if the gift doesn’t reflect a lot of thought. Then there’s the guilt: “They gave to me and we didn’t get them anything” or “My gift isn’t in proximate value to the one I was given.” “Have I been fair and equitable with all the adult children?” And that brings us to the unwrapping mental thoughts. On one side is the giver thinking “Does he/she really like my gift or is she or he just pretending?” On the other side the receiver thinking, “Will I like this gift and if I don’t like it, please let me be a good actor or actress so it doesn’t show.”

And then there’s that unwanted gift placed in the bottom of a closet that you pull out to give someone, only to learn later you recycled the item to the person who sent it to you!

We all know a great deal of money is spent on gifts that recipients either don’t appreciate, want, or have to return.

Gift-giving can also become like a high-wire act trying to balance spending during lean times. People with changes in their financial situation or limited budgets may feel upset and or guilty because they can’t buy as much as they have in the past. Or they may over-extend the credit cards so they can buy what everyone wants.

Thanksgiving is a national holiday with common rituals for everyone, but other holidays such as Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Christmas, are built around particular family traditions generally tied to childhood memories. This can be problematic if the traditions clash leading to a “my way versus your way” conflict. One person may say, “We will open gifts the night before the holiday.” The other replies, “No, we need to open gifts the day of the holiday.”

Most holidays are associated with good times and happy memories. But that is not always the case. Holidays aren’t always merry and are rarely ever perfect. Holidays may activate our feelings of “family” but it can also activate longings for the family member who is missing, be it due to distance or someone away at war or deceased. This can trigger a myriad of emotions; loneliness, sadness, depression and or Holiday Blues.

Holidays can also wake from hibernation left-over family issues, past hurt or bruised feelings, sibling rivalry and conflicts. One woman told me just pulling into her parent’s driveway at Thanksgiving, releases a host of negative feelings and dread. She said, “My sister and I still carry long-simmering rivalry and resentments and even though we try to get along during the holidays, something always surfaces.”

One thing it pays to remember is that the Holiday is really just another day on the calendar. Being with those you love, or with those who enrich your lives, captures the essence of what the holidays really are all about. Best Wishes to you all.

Holiday Dos and Don’ts

DO:

- Make a to-do list and prioritize what has to be done.
- Expect the intensity of holiday togetherness to breed some irritability.
- Give yourself permission to be less than perfect. A holiday isn’t ruined if the gravy came out lumpy or someone spills the milk.
- Try to be flexible about the ways things are done. Some rituals will have to be changed or adapted to accommodate everyone’s needs.
- Remember, someone may drink too much and act badly or show their emotions and pick a quarrel. Don’t take it personally.
- Have a plan to de-stress after the day is over.
- Thank the cook even if the turkey was dry. At least they put it on the table.
- Keep in mind that people – not stuff – are important. Think less structure and more time spent together.
- Keep holiday plans realistic. Enjoyable holidays don’t have to be elaborate.
- Enlist the help of others and delegate duties or have job jar each person draws from.
- Create your own tradition, or alternate what you do and where you go from year to year.

DON’T:

- Commit to more activities than your schedule permits. Don’t be a martyr and do it all.
- Buy into the promise of the perfect family. There is no such thing and never was. Don’t try to prevent conflicts by buying into every family dynamic.
- Expect holidays to serve as quality time for all relationships. You can’t repair all damage or pay all debts in a day or two.
- Don’t expect loved ones to always pick the perfect or correctly sized gift. It isn’t a reflection of their love. Some folks are better at gift choosing than others.
- Expect everyone to be happy.
- Get over tired. Try to keep on a regular schedule.
- Over-eat just because it is there.
- Pretend to be jolly if you don’t feel that way. Discuss how you are feeling or just feel the feelings without guilt.
- Forget the holidays can magnify feelings, good or bad.

Don’t ignore signs of the Blues or Depression.
Contact your EAP counselor for help.

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