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INFERTILITY

Coping with the Holidays

The Winter Holidays

The period from Thanksgiving to New Year's is difficult for many – the single person with no family celebrations to anticipate, the recently bereaved, even the young mother trying to create the perfect holiday. But knowing that others are also miserable doesn't make things better if you're infertile and facing a season for children without a much-wanted child.

At the Thanksgiving table as the family waits for an announcement, it's hard to be grateful for anything. At the mall, surrounded by package-laden mothers pushing strollers and herding wide-eyed toddlers past holiday displays, it's difficult to hold back tears. At the family gift exchange where nieces and nephews are the center of loving attention, it's almost impossible to find the joy that used to come with the season. New Year's Eve, once a sparkling adult occasion of excitement and promise, becomes an evening of regret for the past year's unfulfilled dreams.

These problems won't disappear, and the winter holidays will probably not be an entirely happy time while you are working through infertility. However, there are things you can do to minimize the pain.

Getting Through the Season

Practice answers to difficult questions. If you have anticipated a question and rehearsed a response, you're less likely to be startled to tears and more likely to be able to answer quickly and change the subject.

Pick and choose your holiday "fun." You really don't have to go to every party. Just this year, consider skipping the tree trimming and cookie exchange – "children welcome" – and make something decadent for your newly-married friend's dessert tasting instead.

Consider a winter vacation. Go to a romantic inn or an island resort – eat in restaurants inappropriate for children, and do things you won't be able to do when you have a small child.

Indulge yourself. Do whatever makes you happy. Spend an evening in front of the fire, take a long bubble bath, have the perfect dinner, take a day off to read a mystery. Whatever lifts your spirits, do it, as a gift to yourself.

Do something for someone else. Volunteer in a soup kitchen, take cookies to a nursing home, be an "angel" and buy presents for a child whose holiday would otherwise be bleak, invite someone who's all alone to share your Thanksgiving meal.

Coping at Family Gatherings

Dealing with your family may be the most difficult part of the season, because everything is so intensely personal. Patterns of behavior established in childhood affect your relationships today, and often it's just impossible to act like the reasonable adult you've become in an atmosphere where you feel again like a dependent child. The key to improving this situation is establishing new patterns. Some suggestions:

Give yourself some space. If you travel to spend part of 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.

Limit your participation in the family celebrations. Perhaps you can come in at the end of the gift-opening, or skip it altogether; come for Thanksgiving dinner, but leave after dessert.

Consider some degree of openness about your infertility. If you think you might be ready to let family members know, 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 one-on-one (or two) time with children you really care about. Take them 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.

Shopping for Children’s Gifts

Malls are terrible places for the infertile any time of the year; during the winter holidays they can be especially difficult. So before you gear up for an encounter with masses of pregnant women, gorgeous children, and elves, consider the alternatives.

Internet – You can buy just about anything online today. This is a useful option especially if you must buy “as advertised on TV” children’s toys. Save yourself time and anguish by shopping online instead of at the mall.

Unusual Gifts – Birdfeeders, music boxes, picture frames, and flashlights are just a few examples of “different” gifts available in specialty stores outside the malls. Another idea: fill a box with crayons, markers, paints, clay, and other art supplies or with ribbons, lace, remnants, buttons, and silk flowers for dress-up.

Hobbies – A jar of pennies and a coin book, or a selection of stamps and a beginner’s album will give pleasure throughout the year, as will music or karate lessons, or a subscription to a special interest magazine.

Books, tapes, and videos – A copy of a book, song, or movie you loved as a child could be a very special gift for a young relative; store employees are happy to recommend other choices for any age group.

Don’t shop – Could you contribute to a joint gift or provide the funds and let your mother or brother do the shopping? This is done all of the time for reasons that have nothing to do with infertility; it could mean happier holidays for you and the children you love.

For those who want children but don’t have them, coping with family-oriented holidays can be one of the most difficult challenges of infertility. From religious celebrations to shopping trips, every experience conjures up visions of happy children and serene parents. It becomes almost impossible to maintain an outlook that is at all positive during the Thanksgiving-Chanukah-Christmas-New Year’s holidays in the winter, and in the Mother’s Day-Father’s Day season in the spring.

Infertility: Coping With the Holidays was prepared by Ellen Asprooth and the Educational Materials Advisory Committee of the Ferre Institute, Derwent A. Suthers, editor.

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