



December Stress Getting to You?

Tools for a Positive Holiday Season

By Amy Skinner, MA, LPC, NCC, ACS, RPT-S

Trevor looked at me with tears spilling onto his cheeks, “I just want to see my cousins for the solstice. We always go to their house. I don’t understand why I don’t get to go this year.” Trevor and I were in the middle of a play therapy session, surrounded by toys of food, dogs, cats, people, playground equipment, a grill, books, and his favorite stuffed animal. Trevor was creating a happy family celebration scene, and then showing me that unseen storm or force would come in and destroy the joyful scene. During parent check-in I asked Trevor’s mom, “What is going on with the holidays?” Her normally bright smile dimmed as she began twisting her hands in her lap. “Our family disagrees on the COVID-19 vaccine; some of us are vaccinated and others aren’t. We’ve decided this year to each have our own separate celebrations, and focus on our family gathering next summer when everyone can connect in the outdoors. The adults are all in agreement, but it’s so hard on the kids. Trevor’s never spent a solstice without his extended family. I don’t know how to help him understand.”

Martha and Todd sat in front of me, arms crossed with deep frowns on their faces. “Todd is impossible,” Martha uttered through gritted teeth. “Each year he wants the holidays to be more and more...more lights, more decorations, more money, more events, more cooking, more gifts, more of everything! I just can’t keep up. I know he had a difficult past, but I just can’t handle the unrealistic expectations, and the anger that comes when the expectations aren’t met. Our holidays have become all about his past, instead of being grateful for and enjoying

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our present life.” Martha had tears dripping down her face and Todd’s head was bowed. “Todd?” I gently asked. “What do you think about all of this?” “My parent’s split up when I was a kid,” Todd murmured, “and holidays were all about their lives and schedules. As an adult until I met Martha, my holidays were haphazard at best. Now that I’m in a happy home with my own kids, I just want to make up for all the lost time and experiences. But every time I try to do that, I end up bursting out in anger and ruining everyone’s holiday. Trying to control my present doesn’t seem to be fixing my past.”

Holidays, the expectations and pressures, complicated family dynamics, conflicting traditions and values, all can take a toll. With some coaching, Trevor’s mom was able to validate Trevor’s sadness, support him in focusing on the new fun family traditions (special chocolate chip pancake breakfast, decorating with friends in the neighborhood, and even an extra ski day), and add in Zoom time to connect with extended family. With Martha’s support, Todd was able to notice feelings of frustration and resentment, identify the emotions underneath from his past (grief, loss, disappointment, sadness), and express gratefulness for a manageable number of special rituals with Martha and the kids (lights, hand-cut Christmas tree, meaningful gifts and one holiday concert). This season, whatever your traditions, may you find peace, quiet and gratitude in this beautiful mountain community we call home.