

**When “Happy Holidays” are not so happy.  
By Meg Sullivan, MA, LMSW**

Whether you are riding the emotional and physical roller coaster of infertility procedures or coping with a miscarriage or stillborn pregnancy, the expectations of family gatherings or social gatherings where children or pregnant women are attending can seem like a burden. A major mental health stressor arises when we feel out of sync with the emotions of others. It is particularly difficult to grieve during a time of family gatherings; a media blitz full of jolly, joyful people, and the added tasks and responsibilities of gift-giving. A particularly difficult emotion to handle during religious festivities is anger—anger at self, circumstances, life, spouse and God.

There are ways to get through this—choice, communication, planning, and privacy. Cindy Squillace, Regional Coordinator for the NYS Center for Sudden Infant Death advises, “First and foremost, do not put expectations on yourself. Come up with a plan and leave lots of room for flexibility. If there are offers from others of help—take them up on it. Allow this holiday to be different. Choose not to compare yourself with others—no two people create holidays the same way. Allow yourself to make choices.” Ms. Squillace also reminds us how good we feel when we help others. “Allowing others to give to you-especially during a time of loss-is a gift to them”.

When you are making choices about activities during this season you may wish to consider the question “Will it be the holidays without it?” Feel free to make choices about traditions and obligations and to create new rituals, forms of gift giving, and creating mementos. Listening and heeding to your feelings, intuition, and energy level and being flexible with your plans and obligations can and will make all the difference in the weeks ahead.

The following is a list of “Holiday Jobs” compiled by Marion McNurlen, LICSW, which lends structure to this “choice” part of the process. A factor to consider is that other members of your family may have feelings about the holidays that differ from yours and this provides a scheme to communicate effectively and clearly. Take the time and fix a pot of tea and take the list to the table or couch and sound each other out. You will soon feel a sense of control and teamwork as you make the needed changes to your traditions.

Once again we underscore the need for flexibility as you may need time to experience feelings that are triggered at parties, while shopping, or images from the media. Be very patient with yourself, especially if you are finding very little joy at this time. I’ve also included the concept of privacy in this article to highlight the need to leave room for your feelings, to rely on those you can trust, and to journal your experiences. Giving yourself permission to say “No”, to rest, and set boundaries and build in quiet time is key here.

For those who are struggling at an existential level with God, feel free to air your grievances with pen in hand, and/or a trusted counselor or clergy. God can take it and can hear all of your pain. Give yourself permission to be angry. It’s a normal part of the process and your religious/spiritual beliefs are being transformed by these challenges. My mother suffered tremendous guilt for decades about her first stillborn and after a few conversations with a very understanding priest, she made peace with this experience. The challenges to her faith developed into a crucible for creating what she truly believed. Declare your anger; otherwise its tremendous emotional energy will overtake you. Understand it by taking a clear look at what prompted it. Understand what is so. This gives us the opportunity to stop and decide how we wish to respond not only to our own feelings and to the triggering situations as well. Finally, work it out of your system with something physical, or a creative activity, reading a good novel, or writing letters you don’t send.

Some signs of repressed anger are compulsive behaviors with caffeine, alcohol, or work. Next time your anger spikes do not be concerned about the fact that you are angry, lend focus to the fact that you are managing your anger towards constructive understanding and actions.

Closing with a poem from “Bereavement Magazine” which puts this difficult issue into perspective:

Don't tell me that you understand,  
Don't tell me that you know.  
Don't tell me I will survive,  
How I will surely grow.

Don't tell me this is just a test,  
That I am truly blessed,  
That I am chosen for this task,  
Apart from all the rest.

Don't come at me with answers  
That only comes from me,  
Don't tell me how my grief will pass  
That I will soon be free.

Don't stand in pious judgment  
Of the bonds I must untie,  
Don't tell me how to suffer,  
And don't tell me how to cry.

My life is filled with selfishness,  
My pain is all I see.  
But I need you, and I need your love,  
Unconditionally.

Accept me in my ups and downs,  
I need someone to share,  
Just hold my hand and let me cry,  
And say, “My friend, I care.”