

CHRISTMAS SURVIVAL GUIDE



I wrote this article in 2018. However, in light of global, health, economic, mental health, community crises and losses too numerous to mention, I decided to re-share it.

With the Christmas season upon us, I find traditional images of the holidays are often too optimistic and too perfect. We see cozy, cheerful, tastefully decorated homes, surrounded by white, pristine snow, with happy, well-dressed families gathered around a table sharing a large dinner cooked to Instagram perfection.

Unfortunately, life can be complex and messy and it's impossible to guarantee a picture perfect Christmas. Yet, every year, we still expect it. We work, plan, bake, shop, decorate, craft, build, organize and clean all the while expecting a fun, peaceful, relaxing Christmas. Most of the time we end up with a chaotic and stressful one. It's extremely difficult to be going through a tough time when everything around us looks like a Hallmark movie. For some of us, we would rather stay under the covers and wake up in January! Though the instinct may be to hibernate until it is over, it is not practical or healthy!

When I looked at my social circle, I realized there are many who are going through horrible, trying times: disease, death of a child, a spouse, a friend, a parent, divorce, bankruptcy, job loss, moving away from friends and family. I asked some of my wise friends how they manage the season of "joy" when life seems anything but joyous. This is a summary of what I learned from them:

1. Have a "Survival Plan":

- a) Give yourself permission to say no to social events or engagements that you feel will drain you
- b) Limit how much you are willing to participate in events. Perhaps you can attend for an hour, and leave early? Will you come to the potluck, but only bring store-bought items and rather than stressing out about bringing something homemade?
- c) Create a code word with your significant other so that once you have reached your ability to cope, you can communicate your need to leave with your partner quickly and easily.

2. When going through dark times, our first inclination is to shut people out. That is the worst thing to do. Remember, you are not alone, so try to **surround yourself with supportive friends and family**.

3. If you know someone who is grieving or has experienced a loss, do not be afraid to **invite them to an event**. Ask if you can pick them up and try to stay with them throughout the event for support. Talk about the loved one they lost, share your memories, say their name. It is okay if there are tears. Hearing warm memories of someone who has been loved and lost is like a balm to the grieving person's soul.

4. **Do something different** – go away or visit different relatives or friends. By changing your routine you may not be triggered to spiral into despair.

- 5. Don't push yourself beyond what you feel able to do.** Stress, bereavement, tragedy, or sickness, are all exhausting. Remember to get enough sleep and don't feel you have to do everything you have done in previous years.
- 6. Keep traditions. Or lose them.** Give yourself permission to keep or toss whatever doesn't feel right this year. It doesn't mean you'll never take up those traditions again. But maybe a change of pace is necessary, if only for this season. And maybe, you'll find a new tradition that honors your loss that you will want to keep around for years to come.
- 7. Make self-care a priority.** Take a break from social media, and the perceived "perfect" family and "perfect" Christmas. Nourish your body with nutritious food. Get outside, if even for a short walk or a breath of fresh air. Take a relaxing bath to de-stress. Schedule some time with your therapist so you have a safe person who can help you navigate the ups and downs of the holidays. Escape in a good book, or a binge-worthy Netflix show. Wrap yourself in a warm blanket and cuddle with your pet.
- 8. Write a letter to the ones you are missing this Christmas.** Whatever it is that you wish you could have said to them — go ahead and say it. Even if they'll never have a chance to read it.
- 9. Allow yourself to feel all the feelings of the holidays** - the good and the bad. Sometimes we think that because we are mourning, or we are going through a very difficult time, we should not laugh, smile or otherwise feel merry. But the truth is, we need to smile when we want to smile and laugh when we find joy. The presence of joy does not take away the sadness we are also feeling. It merely indicates that we are indeed still alive, still human, still standing.
- 10. Stick to your budget so you do not create more stress.** You can't buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Rather, donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts, start a family gift exchange, give a gift of experience such as concert or movie tickets, cooking, art or dance classes, a gift of time such as babysitting, carwash, date night out.

The holidays don't have to be perfect, families change and grow, traditions and rituals change as well. Choose a few to hold on to and be open to creating new ones. Volunteering your time to help others can lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. You can make it through the Christmas season with generous self-compassion and kindness. My hope for you is that you will discover some magical moments of joy this holiday season.

This article was written by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She advocates for students and families and provides a link between the student and other supporters within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for more than 20 years and is a mother to 3 teenagers and one young adult.

CHRISTMAS TO-DO-LIST

- ^{BE} ~~buy~~ presents
- wrap ~~gifts~~ ^{SOMEONE}
^{IN A HUG}
- Send ~~gifts~~ ^{PEACE}
- ^{DONATE} ~~shop for~~ food
- ^{BE} ~~See~~ the lights