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Happy Post-Divorce Holidays



Spending the holidays on your own this year? There's lots to look forward to - creating new traditions and enjoying things YOUR way. Here, five do's and don'ts if you're divorced.

By Nina Malkin

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Making merry can feel daunting and unappealing after the demise of a marriage, but by taking the right steps, you can have a spectacular solo holiday season. Here are five moves to make (and five to avoid!) when making the most of your new singlehood.

Five holiday do's

1. Plan ahead. "Structure your holiday time," advises Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., author of Transcending Divorce: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart. "This will help you anticipate activities rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off-guard can increase feelings of vulnerability and loss that are already heightened." If kids are involved, speak sanely with your former spouse to agree on how you'll handle gifts and whose relatives they'll visit on what days. "Letdowns are completely avoidable if you communicate and coordinate with your ex," says psychiatrist Tracy Latz, M.D., M.S., co-author of SHIFT: 12 Keys To Shift Your Life. Then consider how, where and with whom you'll celebrate the season—from a Thanksgiving trip to your hometown through that New Year cruise for singles you've got planned.

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2. Start new traditions. "Divorce is the perfect time to assess and re-create your life as you want it to be," says Elinor Robin, Ph.D., mediator with A Friendly Divorce of Boca Raton, FL. Also, "Ask yourself, 'What do I really want to do over this holiday?' and design rituals you'll want to follow for years to come," says Robin. If you see this as your chance to play host, for instance, arrange a signature event you can hold and call your own—maybe a New Year's Day bagel brunch or a pre-midnight Mass dinner.

3. Reach out far and wide. People can get stuck in a holiday rut during a marriage—they go where they always go, see the same people each time. Now you're free to connect with folks you might be missing or new people you find interesting. "If you worry that you might feel trapped with people you don't know that well, create limits on the time and activities so that you don't feel overly obligated," suggests Sam J. Buser, Ph.D., co-author of The Guys-Only Guide to Getting Over Divorce. "Be an active guest—participate in the preparations, cooking, and clean-up rather than remaining a passive recipient," Buser adds. "That way, you'll feel like a contributor, not a charity case."

4. Connect with the true holiday spirit. Regardless of your religious background, remember what this time of year is really about—exploring and expressing your spirituality. "You may find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new set of beliefs," says Wolfelt. Also, try to make time for volunteering—visiting a children's hospital or helping out at a soup kitchen may help you gain perspective. "Giving back to the community feels good," says Robin. "Plus, it's a great way to meet people."

5. Treat yourself. Put yourself at the top of your gift list. "My ex used to give me things she wanted. One year it was a mountain bike, because that was her sport," recalls Rick, 38, from Ossining, NY. "The year we split, I bought myself a fountain pen for Christmas, the kind I've wanted since college. It's still one of my favorite things." Showing self-love needn't be with a material object. "Take care of yourself during the holidays," says Latz. "De-stress in healthy ways, with exercise and/or a massage."

Continued: 5 holiday DON'TS

And now...five holiday don'ts

1. Succumb to pressure. "Well-meaning friends and family often try to prescribe what traditions are good for you during the holidays, yet you may need to re-evaluate priorities and re-examine expectations," says Wolfelt. "Ask yourself: 'Do I really enjoy this, or am I doing it just to be doing it in the spirit of tradition?'" If you're not in the mood for Aunt Sarah's rubbery latkes (or her probing questions), skip her Hanukkah party.

2. Fight the memories. "It's all but impossible to block out holiday memories spent with a former spouse, and these memories can bring about sudden, sharp feelings of grief," says Wolfelt. "This is a normal, necessary part of the divorce experience. When and if it strikes, be compassionate with yourself and don't be ashamed of your vulnerability." Rather than deny it when strong feelings surface, Wolfelt suggests calling a supportive friend to share the experience.

3. Isolate. "Don't make the mistake of totally withdrawing because you don't want to 'burden' people," says Wolfelt. "Look for family and friends who can provide non-judgmental support. That's what Virginia, 42, from Madison, WI, did. "The first holiday season after I left my husband - ugh - my initial impulse was to hide under the covers," she says. "But when invitations came, I made the attempt to socialize. I had fun, I feel comforted, and, hey, I even got a present!" Simply being out among people may positively affect your mood, even if flying solo—go ice-skating, poke around a gourmet grocery, take in a holiday concert.

4. Go overboard. Whether it's pigging out on pumpkin pie or getting into debt with a mile-long gift list, temptation runs rampant during the holidays. And you may be prone to say, "I deserve this!" as you help yourself to thirds or plunk down the plastic. Just be aware that the ramifications of overindulgence may last longer than a New Year's Day hangover. "Drowning your sorrows about the divorce or not being with the kids won't change anything for the better," says Buser. Where children are concerned, Buser adds, "Pass on being 'Super Claus.' You can't make up for the divorce to by overindulging your kids. All that will do is spoil them, and you'll be setting a precedent for future holidays as well."

5. Leap into something deep. Parties, attractive new people, possibly even dates come with this festive time. All good—as long as you avoid dating with your eggnog goggles on. "Don't jump into a new relationship just because you prefer not to be alone," says Robin. "Enjoy the holiday season as a single!" If you are seeing someone new, "Put some limits on joint holiday plans to reduce expectations and anxieties," says Buser. "For example, you might come for only part of a day's festivities with your new boyfriend's/girlfriend's family rather than the whole experience." Take your time, get your bearings, and move ahead slowly, making sure that taking care of yourself is job number one.

Nina Malkin is the author of An Unlikely Cat Lady: Feral Adventures in the Backyard Jungle.

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