

Can your marriage survive the holidays?

BY RHONDA RABOW, THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 5, 2011

Around this time of year, people start thinking about their holidays. For many, it is a time of excitement and anticipation. For others, however, it can be one of the most stressful times of the year.

Couples who have not been connecting lately can find this time of year particularly tense and frustrating. They need to agree on how to budget for gifts, decide who to invite over and negotiate family visits, children's schedules and meal preparations.

These tasks are challenging enough when everything is going well and you feel your partner is an important contributor to the process.

What happens, however, if things are not going well? What if the two of you have barely spoken over the past few weeks and you're not even sure if you will be together for New Year's Eve? How much more stressed will you feel dealing with all these challenges?

When there is tension in the home, the smallest decision can seem overwhelming and exhausting. When you are unsure of your future, even going to your in-laws for dinner might be more than you can handle. When your partner is feeling hurt or resentful, cooperation and negotiation can be strained if not impossible. You still have to get through the holidays, so how can you handle it best during this time of year?

This is the time to let go of past resentments for now and just focus on the tasks at hand. No discussions will go well if you are feeling resentful and frustrated. Focus on what needs to be accomplished and make suggestions in a calm and positive manner. This will encourage a higher level of co-operation and willingness to negotiate than listing all the things your partner has done to irritate or disappoint you in the past.

Timing is everything, and if you want this to be a pleasant holiday season, emphasize the positive events coming up without dredging up past hurts and complaints. It doesn't mean these issues shouldn't be addressed; it just might mean leaving them for after the holidays.

Here are some survival tips:

- Discuss the budget for buying toys for the kids and gifts for family and friends.
- Discuss how you will make sure the children are fed so they won't be cranky when visiting family.
- Discuss how to make sure the children get their naps before going out for long shopping trips.
- Bring toys when taking your children shopping. They will be less likely to get into trouble if they are not bored, hungry or tired.
- Let your teens know, in advance, what nights you expect them to be present so that they won't be making other plans, then resent being told at the last minute to change them.

-Negotiate whose family you will visit this year and how you will divide up the holidays between inlaws.

-Accept that when you are visit-ing in-laws, they may not respect your choice of food or sweets for your children. You have no control over this and accepting it rather than getting angry will make the visit a more positive event.

-Discuss beforehand how to deal with "difficult" relatives. Set up with your partner some subtle signs you can give him or her to let them know it's time to leave or change the subject. It's easier to handle unpleasant conversations when you know your partner has your back.

The holiday can bring up wonderful memories, times of re-connection, reminding you why you chose your partner and feeling closer than ever. It can also be a time of feeling stressed, frustrated and alone. You can always find a reason to justify whatever you are experiencing, but an open, calm discussion and clear expectations will go far to tip you in the more positive direction.

What kind of memories do you want for your 2011 holiday album?

Happy holidays.

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