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**JINGLE BELLS...JINGLE GONG  
HOLIDAYS FOR THE DIVORCED  
David Knox, Ph.D.**

You've read the headlines "Suicide Rate Higher Among the Divorced" and "More Depression during the Holidays" suggesting that the Holidays are a difficult time for the divorced. Maybe. But no one is immune to the stress of holiday shopping, gift wrapping, food preparation and 48 people in your house. Who wouldn't reach for a little eggnog?

**Why the Holidays are a Problem**

There are at least 3 problems with the Holidays that make this a difficult time for everyone:

1. Expectations People begin before November to plan for the Christmas holidays and to anticipate who will be where. A lot of planning, and often money, go into the anticipated celebration and "it better be perfect" (we think) since a lot of trouble has gone into the preparation.

2. Exhaustion "For all the time and trouble I spend wrapping Christmas presents, I'm honestly glad when its over," says one retiree who reports that his wife "buys the stuff" and he gets to wrap it. Others travel great distances, shop endlessly, and stay up till dawn Christmas eve. "It takes me a week to recover from Christmas" said one parent. "While the kids are opening their presents, I am nodding off to sleep."

3. Expense Commercialization for Christmas is year round (notice "Christmas shops" everywhere) but becomes frantic after Thanksgiving. The goal of corporate America is to encourage you to express your love with money so the "bigger the gift, the greater the love" becomes the mantra of the season. Merchants make their primary income during the Holiday season. The result for us is to spend money and go into debt so that our Christmas card ends up being a fat Visa bill.

Compounding the expectations, exhaustion, and the expense of the Holiday season is the potential loneliness for the newly divorced. For the first time, some moms and dads may wake Christmas morning where their children are elsewhere - an unsettling feeling to say the least. Not only do you miss your children, you have visions of other happy families enjoying their children on Christmas morning. If only you had been more committed or more forgiving or more something (you chide yourself), you could have your family together on Christmas morning too.

Take a closer look -

## **Surviving and Enjoying the Holidays**

To not only survive the holidays but to enjoy them, some suggestions:

1. Be Realistic. While the Holidays are a happy and joyous time for many spouses, for others they are occasions of duplicity and putting up a front. Remember the last Christmas you spent with your former spouse? For most divorced people, the estrangement from the spouse happened long before the actual divorce. The Holiday may have been more a time of observing the mess your life/marriage was in (and planning your escape) than in sharing the festivities of the season. If your partner left you, your Holiday was one in which your partner was keeping a BIG secret from you. This year you won't be in the house with someone who doesn't want you. Rejoice!

2. Watch the Egg Nog Go light on the booze. If you are sad/depressed, alcohol will make it worse. Find healthful alternatives to medicating yourself through the Holidays. Exercise is an unbeatable antidote to stress. But if you've been sedentary, check with your physician before beginning an exercise program.

3. Identify Your Needs and Make it Happen People are different in terms of what they need to happen for the Holidays to be a relaxing, enjoyable time. Some enjoy being alone. "The greatest fear that I have," remarked one single noncustodial parent, "is that someone will feel sorry for me and ask me over for dinner during the Holidays. I'll have to make small talk and I just as soon be home working in my shop or watching TV." Other people enjoy the company of others. If that is you, don't wait till Christmas eve to structure your time. Call up family members or friends and tell them you are going through a rough time and would like to be at their place for a few days. If it's Christmas, get busy shopping and show up like old Santa. Or decide how you want to spend New Year's Eve and make it happen. Call people now and plan the context that you want. If you do nothing, you will end up alone in your place. While some will find that this is the most enjoyable context (saves money, avoids travel hassle, etc), others may want something different.

4. Plan Your After the Holidays Reunion After the Holidays, airline prices drop and traveling becomes much less expensive. Some parents without their kids plan an after the New Year's trip and make this the focus of talking with the kids during the Holidays. So while you may not be able to get with your kids, you can talk with them on the phone during the Holidays about what is to happen after the Holidays. It is a good way to bridge the time you won't see your kids.