



# key

*Unlocking  
Solutions  
To Everyday  
Problems*

*Special  
Winter  
Edition  
2010*

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

**HO, HO, HO, OH NO!**

## EAP COORDINATOR'S CORNER

I have enjoyed the beautiful fall and have raked my leaves just in time to receive the first taste of winter. Many of you have requested my special newsletter on tips for a hassle free holiday.

*Awareness* is the *key* word for the holiday season. *Remember there has to be something better in life than increasing its speed.* Slow down and enjoy these wonderful moments with your family and friends. Take the time you need.

**Happy Holidays  
From your  
Employee Assistance Program**



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**HO, HO, HO,  
OH NO!**

As the holiday season approaches us, be it Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, or Kwanzaa, New Year's, many of us get stirred up by the rapid frenzy that oftentimes ensues the holiday season. We lower our guard to self-indulgence and break promises to ourselves, which in turn makes us feel like failures. The end result is lower self-esteem and self-respect. If this kind of behavior continues long enough, it can equal depression. To prevent yourself from spiraling into a black hole, you need to be aware of your realities.

We set ourselves up for great disappointments by having great expectations. The best example is what I call the "Walton Mountain Syndrome", the place where grandpa, grandma, mom, dad, and all the children can always get together and work out any problem—no matter how big. Unfortunately, this is not realistic. Many families don't see one another until the holidays, sometimes with many years in between. Not having seen one another for years and then expecting to come together for the holidays and "live" as the family you remember from childhood is unrealistic. Many things will have changed and the stress can be overwhelming if your expectations are too high. Prepare yourself for long nights sleeping on the couch or floor and long waits in line for the bathroom. Know that Uncle Tom will drink too much and Cousin Don will tell vulgar jokes.



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Expecting to pack a month's worth of activities into a four hour time period is also a way to spiral into depression. I have heard people say, "Let's see, Johnny's Christmas play is at 4:00 p.m., then we'll go shopping with Joannie, and then we'll get home in time to change for our work party. We can do all of that this evening, no problem."

The problem is that trying to do too much will result in you barely remembering any of the events and certainly prevent you from enjoying them. I like to call it the "Great Paradox". While Christmas is supposed to be a joyful and jolly time, I find people are very lonely. They become too busy trying to do and see everything that the anticipated warmth and good cheer and the sense of togetherness slip through their fingers.

During this time of year our awareness is on full alert, both to the fond and to the unpleasant memories of this season. One of my favorite traditions is the *Christmas City of the North Parade*. When that first band goes by playing my favorite Christmas music, I am always tearful. The music of the season brings back all the fond memories of when I was a child. But it can also bring up bittersweet memories, like the fact that my mother and father are no longer around to share the holidays, or the relationships that have gone sour. People say things like, "Christmas just isn't like it use to be when I was a kid, the tree was taller, the snow was deeper," or, "I'm sure going to miss my old friends this holiday season since our move." These changes can be difficult to overcome.

Enough of what your awareness needs to be in terms of the traps over the holiday season, let's talk about what you can do to avoid these traps. Below are some tips for a hassle free holiday:

- Practice good health all year round rather than just during the holiday season. Stay away from what I call the "SAD" diet, the Standard American Diet that is high in fats and carbohydrates. Practice good health habits 12 months out of the year, not just 10 or 11.

- Remember the old school of thought that "food is love"? That is not always accurate. You cannot get your needs met by intake alone. Exercising in moderation and getting plenty of rest will help you feel better during the holidays, and throughout the year.
- Look at your expectations and be realistic. Don't set yourself up to fail by starting a new diet on New Year's Eve, or quitting cigarettes. It is clear that you may need to look at these things, but the holidays are probably not the time to do so. Other ways to be realistic include: not expecting to buy presents for everyone, or trying to get to both parents' homes on the same day, or driving through a snowstorm risking your life to get to the holiday gathering; or trying to make everyone happy. Try to lower your expectations of your relatives, your families, and your friends. Don't try to live up to the "Ideal Vision" and the exaggerated sense of joy. I am not saying you should be a scrooge, but be yourself.
- Try to be flexible. Remember that unhappiness is the difference between what you expect and what you experience.
- Be reasonable. Is your list of expectations too long? The fewer the demands of yourself or your family, the fewer the disappointments. Also remember, there is more to life than increasing its speed.
- Family rituals. Keep the family strong by creating rich and lasting memories. Here are a few examples; cutting down a Christmas tree, lighting the Kwanzaa candles, attending Hanukkah events, setting up the Advent candles, hanging up the lights. These traditions are a great way to teach your values, your ethics, your roots, and your religious beliefs to different generations and share the same experience.

- Learn to say a little word that is so hard to say, “no”. Learn to say “no” respectfully, learn to say “no” assertively, but most of all you need to be realistic and honest about what you can and cannot do.
- Communicate, compromise, and schedule. This may be a good time to put a large calendar of upcoming events on your refrigerator door. Compromise on conflicting issues and tell your spouse about upcoming events so that there are no surprises.
- Be aware of “first time” situations and plan for them. If you are recently married, realize that there will be some conflict about where you spend Christmas. If you are recently divorced, where are you going to spend the holiday season? If there has been a recent death of a loved one, be prepared for this difficult time. Be with your family or support system, talk about your feelings, let yourself grieve the loss, and reminisce about the good times. To express your feelings is a healthy release, especially around loved ones. To hold it in—to suffer alone—is unhealthy. Sharing brings out the universal truth; that we are all human and that we all struggle within our lives.
- Learn new ways to relax. There are plenty of books and tapes on the market to help you learn new ways of dealing with stress. Try these instead of alcohol or other drugs.
- Emphasize the positive. Give yourself a pat on the back for the accomplishments you had this year. Find the value and find the positive parts of the holiday and emphasize them.
- Be able to maintain a normal balance or mood. Distinguish between unhappiness and major depression. Get out and enjoy the sun! Going for short walks, skating, skiing, or ice fishing are great ways to enjoy the outdoors.
- Hug, kiss or pat the back of that someone special. A simple gesture can make a significant difference for the person you’re reaching out to show how much you care. And one of the most beautiful compensations of life is that no one can sincerely help another without helping him or herself.
- Rent a video. A few of my favorites include “It’s A Wonderful Life”, and “Rudolph”. Read a good book about the holiday season, such as A Cup of Christmas Tea by Thomas Hegg or, I Will Love You Forever by Munich.

I would like to end on a hopeful note. I realize this may sound contradictory regarding what I said about being realistic, but there is magic and a hope during the holiday season that helps us keep in balance. Back in 1897, a man who wrote for the New York Sun by the name of F. P. Church told his daughter the following after she came home from school crying because she was told there was no Santa Claus. He said, and I quote, “Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by skepticism of a skeptical age, they only believe in what they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible to their little minds, not believe in Santa Claus? No Santa Claus! Thank God that he lives and he lives forever. A thousand years from now he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood.”

*Happy Holidays to each  
and every one of you!*

