

Coping with the Holidays A Collection of Articles

Fact Sheet 8

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAY BLUES

by Merle Bombardieri

What if the only thing that got you through last Christmas or Chanukah was the vision of a baby to celebrate with this holiday season? If that was the case, you probably can't imagine how you'll make it through one more childless and chilly winter.

As if your average, run-of-the-mill “No-Baby Blues” weren't bad enough, for most infertile people, the holiday version is still more mournful. There are two reasons for this:

1. **Sharp-tongued “Shoulds” and the Myth of Bliss.** Holidays are stressful for everybody, not just for infertile couples. No one ever fully outgrows a child's expectation that Christmas and Chanukah will be absolutely perfect—full of gifts, food, excitement, love and everything the heart desires. Although adults acknowledge that such perfection is impossible, we still expect 99.7% bliss. Grouchy grandfathers and busybody sisters are supposed to somehow become as penitent as Scrooge and as cordial as Emily Post during the holidays. Our personal problems and foibles, and those of our partner, are supposed to disappear on certain dates. Unspoken beliefs (“I should be happy” or “I should make my relatives happy”) put so much pressure on you that fun becomes work. You wonder, “What's wrong with me (or us) that I can't even enjoy the holidays?”
2. **Holidays are Child-Filled Days.** One RESOLVE member describes Christmas as “Santa Claus and rosy-cheeked children in every store, buying toys and gifts for other people's children, hanging only two stockings

on your mantel, seeing the Nativity scene on display everywhere.” The everyday reminders of infertility are magnified a hundredfold. The joy of seeing children sitting on Santa's knee, lighting a menorah or ripping open a present is destroyed when every child reminds you of the one you don't have yet.

What can you do to make this year's holidays more bearable?

- **Throw Out All The “Shoulds.”** Or at least rephrase them. Rather than tell yourself you should be happy, tell yourself, “I should reasonably expect to feel rotten during the holidays. If I have even a little fun, that's a miracle, a gift and an accomplishment!”

Every “should” you inflict on yourself is a kind of anti-present that leaves you feeling robbed and lacking any festive spirit. Ironically, allowing your grief to surface instead of pushing it down may free your energies for some genuine celebration.

- **Find Childfree Forms of Celebration.** Enjoy a ski trip, a cruise, a luxury hotel or a country inn. You can skip family events if you think they'll be too painful. Yes, you may have to put up with remarks such as “How can you be so uptight about infertility?” or “How could you choose now, of all times, to go skiing?” But those remarks might be more bearable than a roomful of gleeful toddlers.

“Don't put yourself through the ringer,” advises a RESOLVE member. She and her husband didn't go home for a Thanksgiving celebration that included a relative who was pregnant with her second child. Instead they took a trip together. Barbara Eck Menning, RESOLVE's founder, points out that infertile

couples sometimes deny themselves the right to a two-person celebration. “You're as entitled as anyone else to have a tree in your home, even if there are only two presents under it,” she asserts.

How about throwing yourself into the search for, or the production of, a special present for your partner? It's a way of saying, “Baby or no baby, we love each other and we're a family in our own right.”

- **Be Selective About the Family Events You Will Attend.** Perhaps there are some get togethers you would like to attend if you could just find a way to dull the pain. You can take some control. For instance: stay in a hotel instead of a house full of babies; arrive for Christmas dinner after the toddlers have already opened their presents; attend a midnight church service instead of a morning service. By avoiding some family events and changing the way you attend others, you improve your chances of having some fun.
- **Find comfort or Inspiration in a Holiday Theme.** For example, Chanukah is a time of re-dedication and renewal. Renewal is also a major theme in Christianity, and it may help to think of Christmas as the celebration of the beginning of that religion. See if there are personal meanings you (and your partner) can find in Thanksgiving, Christmas or Chanukah that can lift your spirits and aid in your struggle with infertility. These holidays are often associated with hope. Find a way to tap into this, and you will give yourselves an invaluable present.
- **Cheer Up Other Victims of Holiday Blues.** Find someone else whose “perfect Christmas” has been thwarted, perhaps someone who is ill, elderly or away from their family for the holidays. Is there some form of tinsel or sparkle you could offer them? Even if you can't be jolly, you can still be Santa if you bring Christmas cheer to someone else.

Why not celebrate with other RESOLVE members? Consider a “Beat the Blues Party,” an evening program on holiday coping, travel with another infertile couple or a retreat with several RESOLVE members.
- **Take Comfort in the Knowledge that Holiday Blues are Time Limited.** They'll be over that first January morning, when, instead of nursing a hangover, you'll be heaving a sigh of relief. And it's perfectly

okay if the end of the holidays is the only thing you feel like celebrating this season!

SWEET & SALT

by Barbara Eck Menning

Life from its beginning is equal parts of sweet and salt. We spend the first nine months of our existence nurtured on pure maternal honey while afloat in a salty sea. Still, most of us grow to adults calling salt the enemy and claiming sweet as the prize. It is only with the wisdom of many years that we come to accept both. In the words of Robert Frost (from “To Earthward”):

“...Now, no joy but lacks salt
That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain
Of tears, the aftermath
Of almost too much love,
The sweet of bitter bark
And burning clove...”

The holiday season is a patchwork of sweet and salt remembrances. We are urged at every turn to be thankful and to count our blessings. This may be the only appeal you will ever see that urges you to count your losses as well. It does not seem ungrateful to combine the two; they do not negate each other. They coexist. Sweet and salt—a fact of life. It seems natural to ponder both together.

I am not referring to traditional losses. The death of a beloved friend or relative, however tragic and untimely, has elaborate social rituals: paying respects to the deceased; comforting the bereaved; marking significant anniversaries. In traditional loss, grieving is encouraged, supported, socially-encoded as necessary—even majestic. No, I am not talking about losses like these.

There are losses which society does not yet define and, therefore, does not mark with rituals. I think these are the real salt in human lives, the unmarked losses. To name a few: losses of health, capacities or abilities; surgical loss of parts both physically and symbolically important to us; losses of children conceived and never born or never conceived at all; losses of relationships through relocation, misunderstanding or the ultimate rupture of divorce; losses of youth or innocence, of old safe stages in our lives; losses of hopes and dreams.

No ritual of comfort attends these passings. There is no plot for them in the common graveyard. These most intimate losses must be interred in the privacy of the heart. It is there we make our pilgrimage to bear witness from time to time, lay our flowers down, wonder at the meaning, shed our salt tears and move on.

This holiday season, as you consider all the sweetness of blessings in your life and the lives of those you love, I wish you would take an equal moment to consider your losses. Accept both with grace. Give thanks for the richness of sweet and salt which is life.

“RE SOLVERE”

by Catherine Wedge

The New Year traditionally means new beginnings. It is a time of wiping the slate clean, tying up loose ends, starting again. New Year's Eve finds most of us giving at least a passing thought to New Year's resolutions, those hopes and wishes for change we would like to incorporate into our lives so that we emerge a better, stronger, more complete self. We think of New Year's resolutions as casual promises made while sipping champagne and watching the clock's hands move toward midnight. But we can lose the power of resolution when we take its meaning for granted.

The word “resolution” derives from the Latin “re solvere,” to loosen, relax; archaically it meant to dissolve. Modern dictionaries define “resolve” to mean: to separate or break up into parts; to transform; to reduce by analysis; to determine, decide; to answer or to solve as, a problem, hence, to clear up. Synonyms for the word “resolution” are: determination, will, iron will, backbone, clear grit, mastery over, desperation, devotion, tenacity, perseverance, self-conquest, self-denial and courage.

Our personal resolutions usually involve items of business from our past that we have not yet been able to bring to fruition, those things author Maggie Scarf would term our “unfinished business.” From her book of the same name (Ballantine Books, 1981): “As the wheel of the decade turns, so do a person's needs, desires and tasks. Each of us does, in effect, strike a series of ‘deals,’ or compromises between the wants and needs of the inner self, and an outer environment that offers certain possibilities and sets certain limitations. But both the inner human being and the stability of outside circumstances are always in a

process of change... To be depressed, is, very simply, to be stopped short in one's life.”

Our involvement with RESOLVE indicates that, past or present, each of us has experienced that sense of stoppage, of the inability to move ahead into that future that calls to us.

Through the year, we in RESOLVE have shared the infertility crisis in all its stages: the denial stage, the coping stage of information gathering and sharing concerns, the strategy-devising stage and the lonely grief stage when coping mechanisms break down. We envy those who have already moved out from under the weight of the “unfinished business” the rest of us carry like an invisible stone from one day to the next. We long to reach the resolution stage, the attainment of that peace which comes with the completion of the mourning process. At the end of one year and the start of another, it is painful to contemplate carrying the burden of our infertility across the threshold, to look to the future without having released our past.

Let us, as infertile people, greet the implicit challenges of the New Year. We need to look back to the unfinished business still holding us, which means admitting that we remain infertile. We need to look ahead to the future, which we know will contain varying degrees of desperation, devotion, determination and courage. Let us resolve to resolve our infertility.

LOOKING BEYOND MADONNA AND CHILD

by Deborah Hill Hansen

Rituals and symbols, meant to help people deal with their problems and losses, should speak to universal experiences. During Advent and Christmas, Christian symbols and rituals seem to focus on pregnancy and birth. It is assumed that everyone can share in the wonder and anticipation that ends in the joyous arrival of a baby, a miracle each time. However, for the infertile person, all the images of Madonna and Child, not to mention all the secular emphasis on children at Christmas, are vivid reminders of what we cannot have. Sometimes at Christmas it seems as if we are in the middle of some fertility cult. It can make us feel our needs are ignored and that we are unwelcome. However, there are other rituals and symbols available to us.

I began to think about this a lot last Advent after receiving the Episcopal newsletter. On the cover was a touching photograph of a very pregnant young woman looking pensively out a window—meant to be a universal symbol of Christmas. I mentioned the picture and my painful reaction to my weekly Bible class, a small group of women with whom I had been meeting for over a year. They were all enthusiastic about the picture, saying it tied their own pregnancy and birth experiences together with Christmas, enhancing both. As my otherwise favorite author, Madeleine L'Engle, expressed it, the birth experience is “every woman's Christmas.” This seemed terribly unfair to me. Not only was I to be denied the joys of pregnancy and birth, but somehow those very experiences were prerequisite to a complete understanding and appreciation of Christmas. This made me angry; I wasn't going to accept it. The message of Christmas wasn't meant just for women who have been pregnant and given birth.

So I began to search the Bible for symbols and rituals that would have special meaning for me. I found several themes running through the Bible full of special meaning for those of us who are infertile. Often the psalmist, in exile, is longing for home, while I am longing for the child to fill my empty arms. During Advent I also found it more helpful to identify with the longing of Israel for a Savior, expressed in Isaiah, than to focus on the progress of Mary's pregnancy. Another way I have coped with feeling excluded from the symbols of the Advent season is to explore the stories of miraculous births to barren women in the Bible, such as Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, Elizabeth and Anne. I was moved by Hannah's husband's question, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” and Hannah's emotional outpouring before God in the temple. I also identified with Sarah's laughter when she overheard an angel tell her husband that she'd have a baby within a year.

The time before the birth of Jesus was not one of joyous anticipation comparable to a desired pregnancy. Instead it was several centuries of hope against all reason in a world in which it seemed more likely that God had forgotten his people than that He was sending them a Savior. I can identify with the faithful of that time clinging to the seemingly irrational hope that God would fulfill His promises. I can also understand the cost of keeping faith and hope alive.

During Advent and Christmas I have always puzzled over the paradox of a powerful God choosing to come

into our world in the form of a small and helpless infant. Now for me, the greater paradox is of God coming into my life more fully, filling the void created by the absence of an infant.

Advent for me is a time of longing and seeking and hoping. I find comfort in knowing that others, too, have experienced an Advent time, awaiting release from their suffering and isolation. I hope we can find meaning in this season beyond the images of Madonna and Child.

COPING TECHNIQUES

by Barbara Eck Menning

The holidays are upon us. First Thanksgiving, then Chanukah and Christmas and New Year's Eve. For those who have reasons to give thanks and who relish the festivities and family get-togethers, this is indeed a special season of the year. But what about those among RESOLVE and friends who feel no reason to be thankful, no joy in festivities and certainly no eagerness to be celebrating family traditions filled with other people's children. Holiday times are for many a season of great pain, depression and tension as people struggle to keep up with the merriment all about them. I remember those feelings very well—the lonely little Christmas tree with just two gifts under it, eyes brimming with tears as the children's choir sang at Christmas Eve service, the forced smile and perhaps a few too many glasses of punch to get through obligatory holiday parties.

A friend suggested I write some tips on how to beat the holiday blues. I told her I know of no way to BEAT them. As a counselor, my honest reaction is to say to people in pain that they should simply allow their feelings to be and give in to them. But my friend reminded me, correctly, that holidays are filled with moments for which people really want to or have to perform well. They simply cannot take to their beds and weep for a month straight. Agreed. So, here are a few thoughts on coping with holiday blues:

- **Limit the number of parties and gatherings you must attend to the absolute minimum.** If you re-evaluate, often you find you can make excuses more easily than you thought.
- **Omit any occasion which is tailor-made to be catastrophic.** I'm speaking of baby showers, christenings and the like. Holidays are hard enough without these very difficult moments.

- When you do not have to appear happy, friendly, witty and charming, **let yourself be the way you really feel**—sad, introverted, depressed and angry.
- **Be a friend to yourself.** Instead of berating yourself for these feelings, give yourself extra love, understanding and some special treats. For one person a treat is a luxurious bath every night; for another, it is a ski weekend, reading a real tear-jerker or listening to baroque cello music. You know what you like.
- **Whatever feels good, do more of it.** Whatever feels bad, do less.
- **Remember, the holidays will pass.** When I was at my saddest, I hung a sign over the bed which read “...and this too shall pass.” And it did. There is comfort in that knowledge.

APPROACHING THE HOLIDAY SEASON

by Laraine Triplett and Kathy Ems

As the autumn leaves fall around the yard, as the sun sets long before I manage to get dinner on the table, and as the TV season looks suspiciously like the last one, I begin to sense the presence of that most ominous purveyor of bad news to anyone struggling with infertility—the holiday season.

The drop in temperature signals the beginning of several family-oriented rituals. On one such occasion you encounter hordes of precociously attired children invading your doorway for treats while their proud parents linger out on the sidewalk. One has barely recovered from that emotional assault when supermarkets become laden with turkeys, cranberries and various cornucopia all waiting to be consumed in a day-long ritualistic orgy of gastric delights. Families gather around tables overflowing with the bountiful harvest of fall to give thanks for the blessings of life, which of course include the fruit of the womb.

But friends, these two holidays, are only adolescent foreplay compared to what comes next. Even before Thanksgiving is over, the carols ring forth from muzak stations nationwide, decorations adorn shop windows, ads everywhere proclaim the four-member family and Santa is firmly ensconced in every neighborhood mall. Our culture reflects the value that Christmas is children, period. We celebrate Christmas because a child was born. Since the advertisers want to make sure that we spend hundreds of dollars throughout the

season, we are besieged with advertisements of young son hugging Daddy, pretty daughter hugging Daddy, both children hugging Mommy, Daddy hugging Mommy.... I think you get my drift.

Which brings me to the point of this message. Where does the infertile couple fit into all this familial gaiety? Better yet, how does the infertile couple manage to get through these next two months without hiding in the closet or succumbing to acute depression?

Unfortunately, there is no quick remedy for the childless couple, but here are some suggestions to help ease the bumpy road to January.

- **Do not do everything just the way you would if you had a child.** Without the child there will be a void.
- **Do what appeals most to you.** Ignore the holidays as much as you want or go all the way. Shop at boutiques and decorate with all the beautiful, fragile things you'd have to put away if a toddler was in the house.
- **Do not shop at malls.** Avoid Santa; discover and shop at smaller specialty shops.
- **Plan your time with relatives.** Stay only as long as you feel comfortable and pick the time, if any, that will be least painful. Talk to people ahead of time who might say things that hurt.
- **Spend time alone as a couple;** enjoy your feelings for each other.
- **Schedule activities with friends who do not have children.**
- **Plan a trip during the holidays themselves if they're extremely painful or immediately afterward.** Give yourself something to look forward to. Skiing, swimming or sailing on Christmas Day will keep you busy.
- **If you can't get out of town, get tickets to a concert or plan a special dinner out.**
- **Consider getting a pet.** They will think the decorations are just for them, their joy is contagious and they give you something to love.
- **Don't spend the holidays like you did as a child.** Select special things from the past, but begin your own ways of celebrating.
- **Do something for someone else.**

“OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS”

by Carol Frost Vercollone

In this country, mid-November through January 1st is a time of holiday spirits and festivities, often spent with family. However, many infertile couples approach “grandmother's house” with dread that they'll not only go “over the river,” they'll go “over the coals.” The holiday blues are common, particularly for childless couples. Families can easily set off further pain.

If you're celebrating the season with extended family, you may an opportunity to work with them to get the support you need and deserve. This may be the right time to tell your family about your infertility. If they know nothing about it they can't be held accountable for hurting your feelings. While it may be in poor taste for them to invade your privacy by asking, “Why aren't there grandchildren this year?” they can't know the depth of pain they've triggered unless they know you have been trying to have children.

If they know only a brief outline of your infertility situation, they may not know what can be painful to hear. They may not understand how stressful and time-consuming testing and treatment can be. They may not know that even a top specialist can't give you a guarantee of success or pinpoint every cause of infertility. They may continue to give you what they think is good advice. Families have a great need for education. Lengthy holiday visits may be a good time to provide this. If it's too painful or embarrassing for you to discuss your infertility, give them literature to read or suggest they visit RESOLVE's website, www.resolve.org.

Think about what kind of activities you'd like to participate in, what kind of support you'd like and what you need to avoid this year. If traveling to visit family, do you want to stay in a nearby hotel rather than with several nieces and nephews or your pregnant sister-in-law? Would you like to skip the last-minute trip to the toy store and volunteer for other chores? Would you like to arrive for Christmas dinner rather than open gifts at 7AM with the toddlers? Is a midnight church service more comfortable than family-oriented Christmas morning mass?

It can be hard to break family traditions or suggest new variations. Maybe you haven't yet worked out how you want to integrate family celebrations into your adult life. Sharing painful feelings during the

holidays is difficult; you don't want to dampen the holiday mood. You don't want to risk a family member (or worse yet an in-law) angrily saying “Can't you forget this infertility and just enjoy? Why be so depressing?” You also don't want to be pitied and avoided, assumed to be feeling depressed even if this day (or week or month) you are feeling hopeful or more “resolved.” Despite these issues, it is important that you receive sensitive support so that the holidays can be as meaningful and enjoyable as possible for you too.

New Year's Eve is a time of looking forward to the coming year. RESOLVE members know how hard it is to have high hopes; consider letting your families know that also. Let them share in the preciousness of your hopes for the upcoming year.

As difficult as they are to attain, let us wish for each other peace and joy throughout the holidays.

HOLIDAY SPIRIT

by Naomi Angoff

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas...Chanukah is just around the corner ... this will be the best year yet. Come on. Lighten up. Get into the holiday spirit!

Good advice, right? Not necessarily.

For those who are infertile, holidays, especially the winter holidays, can be the most difficult time of the year. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah and New Years are traditionally a time of reflection and renewal, sharing and togetherness. But for infertile people, these holidays may mean reflection of a different kind: the discovery of infertility, an endless regimen of painful tests, a failed in vitro fertilization (IVF) attempt or two ... or three, or the knowledge that producing a biological child will never be an option. For those living with secondary infertility, the holidays may serve as a painful reminder that your child has grown a year older without the new brother or sister you had fantasized about.

Perhaps you were comforted each by the hope that you would have a baby to celebrate with this year. Now you wonder how you can get through the holidays again. You certainly can't make the trauma of infertility disappear miraculously. But by planning ahead and bracing yourself for a little holiday turbulence, you can ease the pain and improve your chances of having fun. Here are some suggestions:

Visiting Family and Friends

DO:

- Plan to spend time with other infertile couples or friends who don't have children if family festivities are too much to bear.
- Consider arriving just in time for Christmas dinner rather than the night before or at the crack of dawn when the children are scrambling to open their presents.
- Attend midnight mass instead of more family-oriented morning services.

DON'T:

- Rely on old family traditions to fulfill your new needs.

Attending Holiday Parties

DO:

- Be selective about accepting invitations to parties and celebrations, especially the ones at which you know there will be a lot of children or pregnant women. Remember, you don't have to say yes to everything!

DON'T:

- Feel guilty about not participating in all the traditional family events. You're going through a painful time, and you need to concentrate on getting through the holidays.

Planning Something Special

DO:

- Spend time doing the things you like best: preparing a spectacular meal, taking long walks, going horseback riding or curling up by a fire with an intriguing novel.
- Plan a special trip—a ski weekend, a luxurious resort vacation, a few nights at a cozy country inn. You may have to put up with comments like, “How can you be so selfish?” or “Christmas dinner just won't be the same without you.” But those remarks may be easier to tolerate than a holiday table packed with happy children, none of them yours.
- Begin your own family traditions: a special ceremony or ritual that says that you and your partner are already a family and can rejoice in your love for each other, with or without children.

DON'T:

- Pretend that there's nothing wrong and carry on with “business as usual.”

Sharing your Feelings

DO:

- Decide in advance how you will handle difficult and insensitive questions. Sometimes it even helps to rehearse your answers. You may decide to confide in friends and relatives as to why you can't join in all the festivities which are just too painful right now.
- Express your appreciation to those who have given you their love and support during the past year. Be sure to keep in close contact with your friends at RESOLVE; many of them are in the same situation and can understand and offer the support that others cannot.

DON'T:

- Be caught off guard by unexpected or invasive questions about your plans for having a family.
- Suffer in silence. But don't feel that you have to disclose all the details of your situation either.

Holiday Shopping

DO:

Shop at smaller boutiques or on the Internet if you find it difficult to face the constant bombardment of holiday cheer.

DON'T:

Do your holiday shopping at malls, where families abound, holiday music blares and hoards of ecstatic children line up to visit department store Santa.

Lending a Helping Hand

DO:

- -Do try to help others in need. Visit an elderly or bed-ridden relative, volunteer at a hospital or nursing home, participate in a holiday program to help the homeless. Cheering up other victims of the holiday blues often has a rejuvenating effect.

DON'T:

- Close yourself off to positive feelings and new experiences. You may find that you have a special ability to make others feel good, even though you're not feeling great yourself.

Staying Tuned In to Your Needs

DO:

- Set aside time to share your feelings with a partner or loved one. Allow yourself to feel sad, deprived or depressed. Infertility is a major life crisis and you are entitled to those feelings. Try to talk to each other about your feelings. Your partner may be the only one who can help you through the bumpy patches.

The information contained in this fact sheet is offered as part of RESOLVE's educational efforts and is in no way intended to substitute for individual medical advice. Discuss your medical situation with a qualified medical professional.

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- Member-to-Member Contact System (where available)
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