

Family rituals are like children: Cherish them, but be flexible

By MARLA GOODMAN,
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The holiday season is a great time of year to connect with family traditions.

Family rituals are important, says Sandy Bailey, Montana State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist.

"Rituals and traditions help families create their own identity and help family members define what is unique and important in their family. They also help us understand what to expect in our family."

A ritual needn't be lavish, exhausting or expensive. Maybe you always have Sunday dinner at your grandparents' house, or go huckleberry picking every summer, for example. A family ritual can be as simple as piling into the car to look at Christmas lights, watching the rose parade on television, cooking pancakes together, going sledding or even walking the dog.

Family traditions and rituals are not just routines, says Bailey. "We may brush our teeth every day, and do the laundry once a week, but those aren't family rituals."

Rituals and traditions have a special meaning and happen with other family members.

One important thing to consider as you approach holiday traditions is that traditions may need to transform over the years to accommodate the changing needs of family members. In one case a grandfather, who was seen as the head of the family, could no longer carve the Thanksgiving turkey, so the family modified their ritual - the cook presented the turkey to the grandfather, then another family member did the carving.

In another case, making a big dinner was getting to be too much work for Grandma, so the family started a Christmas potluck.

As children grow and mature, they may want to take a different part in traditions, or leave behind old ones altogether. Maybe they aren't so interested in decorating Christmas

cookies, but they still like to eat them. Maybe they would rather hide an Easter egg than seek one. Maybe your eight-year-old has had enough of sitting on Santa's lap.

But remember that there is nothing wrong with holding on to old traditions that you all love. Many a grown child still hangs up his or her stocking in anticipation of wonderful Christmas surprises. If it's still fun, why not?

As young adults marry or need to include other people in their lives, family gatherings may need to evolve to accommodate their new obligations. If Christmas is too busy a time for everyone to get together, some families have their big get-together in the summer, or at some other time of year.

Another case where family rituals may need to change is when children spend time with their parents separately, says Bailey.

"Stepfamilies need to respect old traditions while creating new ones for the stepfamily."

Families can create new rituals that include both parents in different ways. Some children spend Christmas Eve with one parent and Christmas Day with the other. Some families may choose to have a gift exchange on New Year's Eve.

"There's no rule that says you must exchange gifts on Christmas Day," says Bailey.

Some people find that they are stressed out by having too many traditions to keep up with during the holidays. If you feel like you have a laundry list that you always have to make it through, take it easy, says Bailey. You don't have to make candy, build a snowman, go sledding, do a jigsaw puzzle, go caroling, visit Grandma, go ice-skating, wrap gifts, read A Christmas Carol, attend the Nutcracker and make a gingerbread house too.

If you feel overwhelmed save some of your plans for another time. Traditions should not feel like obligations, but like something to look forward to.

All stressed out for the Holidays

It's the final countdown for the holidays. Life is a whirl of shopping, wrapping, cooking, rushing here and there without a minute to yourself. In other words, you're stressed.

It's time to call a time out, sit down and de-stress.

"All stress isn't bad," said Brian Kassar, a psychologist at Montana State University. "There's good stress that enhances functioning and is productive. It's about managing it before it turns to negative stress."

An important part of reducing stress is to think about why you do what you do around the holidays.

"People are almost on auto pilot and many fall into the perfectionism trap where everything has to be just so and it runs you ragged," Kassar said.

He suggests to just prioritize and let go.

"Decide what is important and let go the things that aren't. Realize that you don't have to bake cookies for the entire northern hemisphere or that your bows don't have to be just like Martha Stewart's. That will liberate you to focus on what matters."

"Reevaluate your traditions. Is it something you want to hold on to as a family or has the meaning become lost in the task? Are you doing something just for the sake of doing it?"

He suggests starting new traditions that remove some of the burden that has been shouldered by a single person.

"Give yourself permission to do things differently. Doing a few things well is better than spreading yourself too thin and doing a lot of things poorly," he said.

Kassar also offers the reminder that the holidays aren't the time to solve all a family's problems and irritations.

"You won't solve 20 years of family issues at Christmas dinner. So don't confront age-old issues," he said.

What do you do when you feel stress start to build? Kassar has suggestions for stress management:

Relax. Breathe deeply. It is near impossible for your body to be tense when you're deep breathing.

Touch. Even a hug or petting a dog. Touch reduces blood pressure.

Wellness. Eating healthy and getting good exercise will help reduce stress. A good diet gives the mind and body the necessary fuel and a good workout helps muscles relax

and helps deep breathing. Get enough sleep to rejuvenate the body.

Corrective thinking. Much of what determines whether or not we will have a stress response depends on how we think. If you tell yourself you're stressed out, that increases your stress level.

Humor. Laughter and humor have been proven to reduce symptoms of stress. Let yourself laugh out loud.

Get support. Utilize your support network of friends and family.

Practice acceptance. People often feel stressed when they're preoccupied with things they can't change. Realize what you have control over and what you don't.

Express feelings. When feelings are held in, they bottle up and lead to stress.

Maintain a normal routine. Don't use the holidays as an excuse to eat poorly or not exercise. Maintaining a normal routine can

help minimize stress in the midst of trying to meet holiday obligations.

"Most of all, focus on the present," Kassar said. "Allow yourself to enjoy the moment. Soak in the sights, sounds, smells and experiences of the holiday season. Don't miss out on your experience or let it become a blur because you're focused on other tasks or commitments. Focus in on your reason for enjoying the holiday."

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