

What to Do When the Holidays Hurt

“The more noble a thing is in its perfection,” observed the sage Yohanan ben Zakkai, “the more ghastly it is in its decay.” It’s true. The further something is from its ideal state, the worse we feel about it. Which means the holidays can be awful when you or someone you love is suffering.

Even putting aside the national funk that has descended upon us in 2018 with shootings, elections, bickering and scandals, a lot of people this year are dreading the holidays. When the idea of happy family and friends gathered around the holiday table runs smack into the reality of a recent divorce, a kid in rehab, Dad in the nursing home or Mom’s funeral last month, it really hurts.

So what do we do during the holidays if we are in pain? First, be honest. Pop culture and consumerism might not give us permission to acknowledge grief or sadness during the holidays, but you can at least grant that permission to yourself. Tell people you want to keep it low-key this year. Let them know that being around groups of people celebrating only makes things worse. In other words, don’t go.

The year that I was struggling with opioids and depression following spinal surgery, instead of showing up at any number of holiday parties to which I was invited, my wife, two kids and I served Christmas dinner at a homeless shelter in Santa Monica. It felt wrong, impossible really, for me to celebrate. But it felt right to serve others. The ancient rabbis knew what they were doing when they forbade mourners to attend weddings and other celebrations for a year. It wasn’t because a mourner celebrating was disrespectful to the deceased, but because it was disrespectful to the mourner--an affront to his or her own pain.

Dostoyevsky said his greatest fear was that his life would not be worthy of his suffering. This holiday season your suffering is an invitation to say no; and an invitation to find the yes behind that no. Say no to the holiday table and yes to serving others. Say no to the hellish travel required to migrate upstream for Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas or New Year’s and say yes to hunkering down with a pot of tea, a good book and a warm blanket. Say no to the noise and the booze and the calories, and say yes to a quiet, healing walk with a friend who has also had a terrible year. Say no to the shopping and say yes to a charity that needs the money more than Amazon. Say no, I cannot be happy, but, yes, I can still be good and gentle and kind—especially to myself. Say no to pretending everything is ok, and yes to reaching out to the few who really do understand and love you no matter how wounded. To put it glibly but perfectly, the people who mind if you don’t show up for the holidays this year don’t matter, and the people who matter, don’t mind.

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