

Keeping the Holidays Happy By Deena Solwren, LCSW

The Holiday season ushers in high spirits and great hopes. Excitement grows as our special holiday celebrations approach. At this time of year, we often feel a little extra bounce in our step. Whether we celebrate Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanza, or the winter solstice, we may catch ourselves singing both inside and even outside the stores along to the muzak versions of Jingle Bells, Deck the Halls, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas, and other season favorites.

The holidays gain increasing importance when we have children to share them with. We may want to create a celebration exactly as we experienced with our families of origin, or do the exact opposite. If it's your baby's first winter holiday, you may want to make it extra special for yourselves as 1st time parents as well as for your baby at this momentous occasion. If you have toddlers, it may be the first year they can truly appreciate all the hoopla – decorations, gifts, candles, family gatherings, special foods, songs and games. We may earnestly desire to fulfill our children's every wish so they'll be happy; and then, we gain pleasure from witnessing their happiness.

The "Christmas spirit" seems to start earlier and earlier every year. Insidious pressure from advertisements, television shows and movies encourage mass consumerism and consumption as the foundation for a happy holiday celebration. A local Church posted a sign for its seasonal craft fair before Halloween, and store decorations started appearing the day after Halloween. Older children, even those as young as 3, are influenced by their friends and advertisements to want what they see.

Along with the wonderful opportunities this season provides, also come high expectations that our celebrations "should" turn out a certain way. As expectations rise, so do the possibilities for disappointments. The desire for everything to "go perfectly", adds further stress and pressure to our already hectic schedules. This increased tension can lead to heightened irritability, shortened tempers, and arguing. We may feel under-appreciated, hurt that our best efforts aren't enough, and disappointed in ourselves for failing those we so want to please.

Yearning for family togetherness, we turn to those closest to us, especially our partners, to fulfill our dreams and meet our needs for love, happiness and joy. Although every one really wants to be happy, we don't always know the best way to get what we want. It is important to realize that there are as many paths to happiness as there are people, and everyone has the right to be happy and strive for self fulfillment in her or his own way. Family can provide a wonderful source of support when people truly hold each others best interests at heart. Unfortunately, not all families offer happy, healthy, supportive environments which help each family member get her or his basic emotional and material needs met. We try hard to pretend that everything is o.k. Family members place various levels of pressure on us to act "as if" everything is o.k. In some families, abuse and violence occurs. Such destructive behaviors ruin the chance to experience the honest celebration that the holiday season is about.

The season's trappings can make us feel even worse if we already struggle with depression, anxiety, loneliness, and/or fear. The often rainy and cold days along with the long, dark winter nights encourage one to embrace a desire to withdraw inward or act out against those who cross our path. "Jingle Bells" and "White Christmas" create an awkward juxtaposition to the surreal quality of the traditional notion of Christmas-time and can leave one feeling

exceptionally isolated in one's own private anguish. The exaggerated pressure to be jolly can make it even harder than usual to admit to oneself and others when all is not right.

During the holidays domestic violence crisis hotlines tend to get fewer calls and fewer requests for services than at other times of the year. But the calls they do get tend to be for severe situations. The number of hospital emergency room visits increase during this time period even though the number of crisis calls declines. After the holidays have ended, from January through the spring is the busiest time of the year for calls to shelters and counseling centers as women act on their New Years Resolutions to get out of unhealthy, unsafe relationships and work to create a better life for themselves and their children.

What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence is about power and control. Domestic violence happens in all types of intimate relationships – rich or poor, straight or gay, young or old, married or dating, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Atheistic, and white, black, brown, and every shade in-between. It's one person using violence or threats of violence to intimidate and hurt an intimate partner. The forms of violence include verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, and financial. Intimidation, coercion and threats, blaming the victim for the abuser's behavior "if you could cook, I wouldn't have to throw this crap you call food across the room", manipulation. Forcing, coercing you to wear clothes you're not comfortable in or engaging in sexual acts against your will/desire, name calling – cursing at, put downs; violence – hitting, slapping, punching, choking, kicking, with or without objects, Controlling money, not letting the victim leave the house, make phone calls, interferes with independent relationships, isolates, minimizes the extent of the abuse "it's was only a slap..." "She bruises easily..."

The Cycle of Violence

The Effects of Partner Abuse on Children

We rarely think of children as the victims of spousal abuse, yet the children are put in great danger when one parent is being physically, emotionally or psychologically abused by the other. Like passive smokers who are forced to breathe the air polluted by others' cigarette smoke, children become the passive victims of abuse in families where spousal abuse occurs. Children may also be direct victims of abuse, either intentionally or unintentionally, of an abuser's assaultive behavior. Children who live in a home where abuse occurs automatically become victims by default.

There exist many ways children are victimized by a parent's abuse against their partner. Domestic violence often starts when a woman is pregnant. The baby-to-be, while still in utero, is at risk if the woman gets hit or kicked in the stomach. This violence and the associated stress of living in an abusive situation can cause the woman to miscarry or deliver a still-born baby. A child may get caught in the "line of fire" of a swinging fist or a thrown object. Older children may be hurt while trying to protect their parent. Sixty Three percent of boys, ages 11-20, who are arrested for homicide have murdered the man who was assaulting their mothers. (MS., vol. 5, no. 2, 1994)

Numerous studies have examined the association between child abuse and partner abuse. One study found that 53% of spouse abusers also abused the children. Another "study of more than 900 children at battered women's shelters found that nearly 70% of the children were themselves victims of physical abuse or neglect. Nearly half the children had been physically or

sexually abused. Five percent had been hospitalized due to the abuse. However, only 20% had been identified and serviced by Children and Family Services prior to coming to the shelter. The same study found that the male batterer most often abused the children, in approximately a quarter of the cases both parents abused the children, and in a few instances only the mother. Lenore Walker's 1984 study found that mothers were 8 times more likely to hurt their children when they were being battered than when they were safe from violence." (DOD, Office of Family Policy Support and Services, 1993)

Regardless of whether or not children are physically abused, witnessing domestic violence causes severe emotional damage. Children frequently know abuse is occurring even when the adults believe they have not actually seen it. "Approximately 90% of children are aware of the violence directed at their mother" (ibid). Each year, at least 3 million children witness domestic violence.

The emotional effects of domestic violence on children mirror the effects on the adult victim. Some of these include: taking responsibility for the abuse, constant anxiety, guilt for not being able to stop the abuse or for loving the abuser, and fear of abandonment. Abuse engenders behavioral problems such as sleeplessness, nightmares, fighting and hurting other children or animals, temper tantrums, withdrawal from other people and activities, depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation or attempts, acting perfect, over achieving, difficulties concentrating and paying attention, bed wetting, and medical problems such as asthma, ulcers, headaches, stomachaches, and eating problems (Jones, Schechter; When Love Goes Wrong, 1992). Witnessing violence as a child is the single most consistent risk factor for battering as an adult.

Clearly, domestic violence has grave effects on children as well as adult victims. Domestic violence can be considered a form of child maltreatment and extend to direct forms of child abuse. For the physical health and safety, the psychological well-being of the children and adult victims of domestic violence, and to stop the inter-generational cycle of abuse, intervention is critical. The only way to stop the violence is to seek help from outside sources of support. Help is available.

Scott's Story:

I learned not to care about holidays or gifts. Every Christmas or Birthday, or any celebration, I'd get to play with my toys for a little bit, then my father would get angry and start yelling and take everything away or break it. He'd usually end up hurting my mom and terrifying my sister. The violence didn't just happen on what were supposed to be special occasions, but it seemed worse then, because we were trying to make it nice. So, in comparison, it was a bigger let down, more disappointing. But, living with the emotional abuse and threat of violence was always there.

I still have a hard time with any celebrations, but I really want it to be different for my children. And I work hard to make sure they have a good time and I don't spoil things for my family like my father did for me, for us.

Take Care of Yourself

The greatest gift you can give your children is a happy, peaceful, loving home free from the fear of violence. Children will enjoy your company and devoted attention more than any present. There are steps you can take to take care of yourself and your family during this holiday season:

- 1) THINK ABOUT WHAT THE HOLIDAYS **REALLY** MEAN TO YOU. ACT ACCORDINGLY.
- 2) SET LIMITS – DON'T TRY TO DO IT ALL. SIMPLIFY YOUR PLANS.
- 3) SCHEDULE QUIET TIME FOR YOURSELF.
- 4) KEEP TO A BUDGET – DON'T OVERSPEND.
- 5) BE REALISTIC; BE FLEXIBLE.

Nothing is ever perfect or turns out exactly as planned. Be willing to change your plans if something comes up.

- 6) KEEP EMERGENCY PHONE NUMBERS AT HAND – USE THEM

Staying in a shelter over the holidays may not be anyone's idea of a great holiday, but neither is fighting, living in fear, having the police called to the house and trips to the hospital emergency room. Staying safe, staying healthy, staying alive is much more important than appearances. Give yourself and your children the gift of peace.

If you, or someone you know, are a victim of domestic violence, call for assistance. Learn what rights and options exist for victims and batterers.

Resources

Anger Management

Peace Creations in Oakland. 834-7088

Center for Violence Resolution in Oakland 836-3991

Counseling

Hilltop Counseling Center in Richmond/Hilltop of Contra Costa County 849-5455

STAND Against Domestic Violence located throughout Contra Costa County
Individual counseling for victims and children, Anger Management, Legal Resources,
Support Groups, Safe Houses/Shelters 1(888)215-5555.

Hotlines:

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1(800) 799-SAFE

Local Hotline serving the greater Bay Area: 1(888)215-5555

Legal Services

Family Violence Law Center serving Alameda County 208-0220
Domestic Violence, restraining orders, divorce

STAND serving Contra Costa County 1(888)215-55555

Shelters

A Safe Place Oakland 510 536-7233

Asian Women's Shelter in SF 1(877)751-0880

Building Futures for Women and Children in San Leandro 1(866)292-9688

La Casa de las Madres in SF 1(877)503-1850

Marin Abused Women's Shelter (MAWS) in Marin 1(415)924-6616

Web Site:

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (<http://www.ncadv.org>)

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