



Newsletter from the Open Grove

forward thinking; interactive radio

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Welcome to the Open Grove! While most of the country is grateful for the lack of snow, we at the Open Grove continue to hope for a few inches to help our wintering trees. Our friend, Steve Ela, of Ela Family Farms, commiserated that he also wished for some snow to help his dormant apple, peach and pear trees.

As we continue to watch the weather, we hope you will enjoy our seventh issue of the Open Grove Newsletter. In this issue, we will discuss some ideas about surviving the holidays and share with you some ideas about stress management during the holidays.

Surviving the holidays

The holidays are one of the most stress-filled times of the year. Families, who may or may not contact each other throughout the year, are thrown together to celebrate family traditions. Adult children often find themselves reliving family roles which they felt like they had resolved years before. With the increase in personal pressure, marriages erupt in anger, children act like “monsters” and many of us think, “Why bother?”

Yet we are drawn to spending this time of the year together. Is it possible to “survive the holidays” with our sense of our self and our relationships in tact? Absolutely. Here are some simple skills, which will help you survive, and possibly, thrive this holiday season.

1. Make sure that what you feel matches what you are doing. Notice when you feel good or peaceful – what are you doing? Notice when you feel awful – what are you doing? If you feel awful buying Christmas presents or participating in some traditional event, don't do it. There is no reason to be miserable. Think creatively. If you don't like staying at your parent's house, stay in a motel. If you dislike buying Christmas gifts, try getting things on-line or giving the money to charity.
2. Don't be afraid to change some traditions. Traditions are simply things that have been done before. They were good ideas that made sense when they were originally invented. That does not mean that they make sense to you, your family or in the year 2001. If a tradition bothers you, it's really OK to not do it or modify it in some way that makes more sense to you.
3. Uncover your holiday values. What are your values? Do you value a tree full of presents or simply the idea that someone is thinking about you? What are your monetary values during the holiday season? So many people go way outside of their values during the holidays by spending too much (monetary value), eating too much (physical value), and going along with the crowd spiritually or emotionally. By betraying your values, you betray your self. One way to be true to your self is to develop a set of holiday values, which might be different from your every day values. (Ex., during the holidays it's OK to eat some cookies, but not the entire plate of cookies.) This allows you to experience the season without experiencing the seasonal self-loathing.
4. Focus on gratitude. Can't stand your uncle? Do you spend every holiday wondering when he will be drunk enough to tell you his vasectomy story again? Forget it. Focusing on him (or any other annoying person) only makes you miserable. Work toward shifting your focus to

something you are grateful for. Gratitude is an excellent antidote to any dysfunctional family situation. Can't find anything to be grateful for? Get basic – remember to be grateful for hot water in your shower or clean water to drink. It really works.

5. Work toward acceptance. Let's face it, most American families are a bit dysfunctional. Maybe it's time you accept the fact that your parents are exactly the way they are. Often we learn to judge people in order to avoid our feelings of disappointment and sadness. For example, we judge our mother as "unfair" to avoid feeling our sadness over not getting our needs met. You must realize, however, that acceptance is the last stage of grief. Working toward acceptance means that you allow yourself to grieve what you didn't get, while detaching from trying to change what actually exists. It's a process that won't happen overnight; it will never happen if you don't start.
6. Create your own holiday vision. It's really Ok to think about and manifest what you want at the holidays. Most people don't spend any time thinking about what their ideal holiday would look like. They simply get caught up in someone else's idea of what the holidays' "should" look like. Spend some time really thinking about what you enjoy and what would be fun for you. Have to do something you don't want to? Rather than spending your time focusing on things that you can't control, focus on what you would work for you in these interactions. You can create your own vision even for events that feel unpleasant.
7. Remember to take good care of yourself. Your primary responsibility in life is to take good care of yourself first, others second. Don't forgo self-care during the holiday season. It's simply the worst thing you can do for yourself (and everyone around you).
8. Take a break. Staying at your parent's house over the holiday? Make sure to take some time for yourself and your family. Plan a dinner with just you and your spouse. Can't take that much time? Spend an hour driving around looking at holiday lights either alone or with your own family. No one will be offended and frankly, most of the time no one notices. Taking a break allows you to recharge and attend to your primary relationships. This can only help your overall family dynamics.
9. Self-kindness, self-kindness, self-kindness. Let's face it. Dealing with your primary family's issues is not easy. (This is the reason there is an occupation called "therapist".) Work with your inner-critic to understand that you are making changes and that relationships, particularly family relationships, only change over time. Practice being kind to yourself when you feel disappointed with yourself. Self-kindness will carry you through some of your most difficult holiday moments. (For those who don't know, self-kindness sounds like: "I am OK", "I did the best I could", "gosh, look at how hard I tried".)
10. When all else fails, breathe. Sometimes things just don't work out. Someone drinks too much or you get in a big fight with your spouse. Let go of your belief that things need to be perfect. Things are simply the way that they are – good or bad. When you find yourself in "one of those moments", breathe. Remind yourself that everything is really Ok. The sky is indeed blue. The world continues to rotate. In the big picture, everything is really OK.

Good luck! Feel free to email me (claudia@opengrove.com) your "worst holiday" stories and I will attempt to share them in our December 31, 2001 issue. Sometimes all you can do is laugh about it after the fact.

Stress management at the holidays

Rachel Harris' book 20-minute Retreats is an excellent book to have (and use) during the holiday season. 20-minute Retreats outlines hundreds of retreats which will help you handle stress and frustration during the holiday season. Retreats range in length from 1 minute to day or week long retreats. The nicest thing about these retreats is you can receive relief quickly and without drawing anyone's attention.

I have picked out a few that might be helpful this season:

Faith in yourself (1-minute retreat)

"The fastest, most effective way to give yourself a confidence boost at any point during the day is to use the technique from Structural Awareness.... You can do this sitting, standing, or even walking. Simply imagine that when you inhale, the breath goes straight up through your torso and out through the top of your head. As you inhale, feel your rib cage expand and lift. This slight shift in posture will give you the confidence you need to have faith in yourself." (p. 41)

Let go (1-minute retreat for patience)

"When you feel yourself becoming impatient with a situation or a person, notice how you're trying to control to achieve a certain outcome. Take a deep breath and gently exhale through your mouth as if you were blowing out a candle. The exhale should be slightly longer than the inhale. As you exhale, let go of your expectations. Exhale and again let go of any expectations." (p. 176)

Smooth your forehead (5-minute retreat)

"In biofeedback training for muscle relaxation, the frontalis muscle of the forehead is often used as a focal point. This is because it has been found that as the muscles of the face relax, the rest of the body relaxes.

Depending upon your circumstance, you can do this retreat either sitting or lying down, in private or during your workday. Simply imagine that you can smooth the wrinkles out of your forehead. With every exhale, imagine your forehead becoming more relaxed. You can concentrate on different thoughts to enhance your relaxation. Imagine that your eyebrows let go. Your scalp eases. You can say to yourself, "My forehead is smooth as silk." You can use your fingertips to lightly stroke your forehead in a slow, soothing manner.

Notice that as you do this retreat, a general feeling of warmth and well being arises in your entire body as you deeply relax." (p. 216)

What do I need right now (1-minute retreat for self care)

"Pause frequently throughout your day, no matter what you're doing. Take one full breath. Ask yourself, "What do I need right now?" and wait for an inclination, an inner response, any small glimmer of direction. If no answer emerges, don't worry. Go on about your day until you pause again to repeat this question. If you do receive a response to this question, please honor it – within reason, of course. If you regularly ignore your internal yearnings, getting in touch with your needs will become more difficult. This will help you begin to notice your inner messages and honor them as they appear." (p. 257)

