

Dealing with the holiday season as a newly divorced couple

When you go through a divorce or separation, there are all kinds of “firsts” you have to confront: the first nights alone in your bed; the first time your anniversary passes; the first time you go on a date with someone new. The first holiday season you spend as a separated or divorced couple, is a particularly challenging “first” for many people. For most, the holidays are a time of familial togetherness; it’s a moment when families gather to take a breath at the end of the year, share food, and take part in festive traditions and rituals. When the unit that previously made up your family is broken, this time can likewise seem shattered and perhaps even hopeless, often leading to feelings of doubt, anxiety, and depression. How is it possible to celebrate family when it feels like it no longer exists in the way it used to? How can you put on a happy face for your children and relatives when holiday cheer is inaccessible to you? Here are some ideas and insights that can help you navigate the holiday season - from merely getting through it to hopefully even enjoying it.

Helping yourself

First of all, recognize that it isn’t all in your head: this really is an especially difficult time. One way to release stress and negative emotions is to do the best you can to remove any absolutes or black-and-white thinking from your mind. Replace the word “should” with “could” and “perfect” with “good enough”. Allow yourself to be where you’re at and experience the painful or uncomfortable feelings that will likely arise. Keeping your feelings bottled up and feigning happiness will do more harm than good. At the same time, *expecting* things to be bad can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, so invest energy in finding things you love about this time, and take pleasure in the peaceful and joyful moments that come your way.

Helping your children

If you have kids, it can be a huge challenge to figure out how to handle the intricacies of who they will spend the holidays with. What used to be the most fun part of this season may now feel full of negative emotions and conflict. In these times, remember that children are both resilient and sensitive: they can adapt to many modes of being and situations, but they’re equally able to pick up on moods and non-verbal forms of communication. Allow your kids to express their feelings about this new holiday orientation and schedule. Be excited for them, what may seem burdensome to you can still hold a lot of magic for your kids.

Helping your former partner

It may be the furthest thing from your mind, but remember that the person you used to share your life with is probably having just as difficult a time as you are. Being patient and generous with their needs will also help you in the long run. Kindness towards your ex will show your kids and the rest of your family that it’s possible to still celebrate being a family, even if that family does not look like it did before.

It is true that after a divorce, nothing will ever be the same. The holidays are no exception. So instead of trying to mold this new reality into the shape of an imaginary past, try and welcome change. Together with your kids, your ex, and your extended family, be creative and come up with new traditions and ways of celebrating, rather than trying to stick to the old ones. Holidays won’t be what you imagined or what they used to be, but they can still be a joyful and loving time of celebration.

Teaching your kids about diversity and tolerance

Even as our streets, neighborhoods, cities, and our country grow more diverse, discrimination and bias continue to proliferate. The world we are raising our children in is one where people continue to be discriminated against based on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, religion, and physical or mental ability. It can be hard to know how to teach our children to be accepting and tolerant of difference, when it seems like attitudes are so rapidly shifting. Here are some ways to make diversity education a priority, and tips to integrate it into your day-to-day life.

Educate yourself

It can be daunting to teach children about diversity when you feel that you are not up to speed on what is acceptable and what is not. Recognize that all of us hold biases inherited from our parents, our peers, and the media; noticing these biases, which so often fly under our radar, is what counts. Be honest with yourself and challenge any biases that you discover before talking to your kids.

Change your language

Much of what we learn is passed on through the words we use. Calling something “gay” or “retarded” used to be common, but these words are now understood to be offensive and oppressive. When you hear your child using racist, sexist or homophobic language, point it out and try to find alternative words. For example, instead of calling a party “lame”, which is offensive to people with physical impairments, you could refer to the party as “boring”, or “dull”. Another way to challenge discriminatory language is to ban generalities: don’t allow yourself or your children to refer to any group of people as a whole, as in “*all Canadians are polite*”, but encourage them to be specific, “*Samantha is polite*”.

Diversify your life

Broadening your child’s range of experiences and narratives will work to increase tolerance. This TED talk explains [“the danger of a single story”](#), so lead by example and expose your child to a multiplicity of stories, practices, and voices. Read books that come from cultures and countries different from your own, learn a different language, taste and cook ethnically diverse foods, or visit a family who practices another religion when they are celebrating a traditional holiday.

Learning is unlearning

People aren’t born with prejudice or discriminatory beliefs – they learn them. Children are naturally curious about difference, and may ask questions that sound insensitive, but they are also very tolerant of difference. Teaching children about diversity is less about *teaching* new information, and more about undoing the information children receive from the media and some of their peers. If your child says something that is offensive towards a group of people, remember that they probably learned it from somewhere or someone, and it can likewise be unlearned.

Play “what if” games

A great way to get your child thinking about diversity is to invite them to play “what if” games. Ask questions like “what if you were teased for the way you look?”, “what if you were the only one in the room who didn’t speak English?” These games will illuminate how your child may handle specific situations, and is a great way to start a meaningful conversation about difference, tolerance, and empathy.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help through a variety of resources. Call your EAP at [1.866.468.9461](tel:1.866.468.9461) or visit shepell.com.



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These are just some ideas to bring increased tolerance and diversity into your children's lives. Teaching these skills is about encouraging critical thinking, and challenging assumptions and dominant representations. If your children express prejudiced views or language, ask them why they think that way, and likewise encourage them to ask questions when they receive general information about a whole group of people. Make diversity-education a part of your everyday life – because it's really an ongoing process and long-term project!

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