



How to Survive the Holidays

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If you are going through a divorce, the holiday season can be a special nightmare.

The expectations of your family of origin and/or those of your in-laws are added to the demands placed upon you by your soon to be ex, your kids, and your work place. If you are struggling financially, you may feel inadequate because you cannot provide the quality of gifts for your family that you may have provided in past years. Commercial expressions of “good cheer” are everywhere.

If you are the spouse who sought the divorce, you may feel some guilt or uncertainty about your decision. Your spouse may be all too good at pushing those buttons.

Here are some tips for getting through it all:

1. Place yourself in your children’s shoes. Really. When you are tempted to argue with your spouse, respond to an attack launched by your spouse, or even launch one of your own, stop, breathe, and think. Where are your kids at that very moment?

Are they in the next room? Are they in the back seat? Are they upstairs in your house? If so, they are within earshot. They are probably even straining to listen. Don’t kid yourself.

You cannot control your spouse any more than you can control the north wind. You *can* control your response to your spouse’s behavior. Block the chance that things will escalate into an argument. Acknowledge whatever legitimate point is being made by your spouse and do your best to respond only to that. If you are wrong, say so and apologize. Offer to think about what he or she is telling you and tell him or her that you will respond later. Buy yourself some breathing room. If you can, paraphrase the content of your spouse’s message, so that he or she sees that you have indeed heard it.

Example 1: “I understand that you are mad because I got here 30 minutes late and that is making you late for your doctor’s appointment. I got stuck at the office and I am sorry. I will make sure it does not happen again. Next time something happens that I cannot control, I will call you right away.”

Example 2: “I understand that you are very angry with me, but I do not think we can have a good conversation about it right now. Let’s see when we can talk about (lateness, money, whatever the problem is) when we are alone and we are better able to do it without yelling at each other.”

Example 3: “I hear you. This is something that our attorneys will have to discuss and advise about because I do not know what the answer is. I will call mine first thing in the morning and ask for his/her guidance.”

Example 4: “I hear you and I want to understand why you are so upset. As long as you are screaming at me, however, I just can’t do that.”

If none of this is possible, leave the room. Leave the house if you have to do so. Drive away. Whatever it takes to break the circuit. Try to envision your spouse as a co-worker. You wouldn’t launch into an intensely personal argument in the work place, even if you were unfairly attacked, would you?

2. If you normally use alcohol or other substances to get you through difficult family events, do not do it this year. Remain focused and alert. You want to be in full control of your ears and your mouth so that you can respond appropriately to any provocations. After having a few beers or too many glasses of wine, you will find it harder to keep your mouth shut.
3. If your spouse backs out of or tries to change a holiday custody agreement, is late for a pick up or drop off, or holds your kids hostage for an hour or two, go back to Tip #1. Give way.

This is hard. It’s really hard. Be that parent who takes the high road. Your kids don’t care who “wins” – they just know that if mom and dad spend the next 15 minutes fighting over pick up, drop off, or who does the driving, they’ll be late for or even miss their holiday concert or, worse, they will be deeply embarrassed in front of their friends. Unless your spouse’s conduct threatens an overnight or the holiday itself, it rarely makes sense financially to get your attorney involved.

4. Remember that your new relationship takes a back seat to the (reasonable) needs of your kids. If your significant other starts placing demands on you that feel unfair and unreasonable, that’s probably because he or she is feeling insecure. The stress of the holidays heightens our sensitivity to that sort of thing and that means unintended slights get magnified and people make demands that make no sense. Stop, hug, and talk. Repeat as needed. Your significant other may be worried about his or her role in your life – give him or her permission to directly tell you about those feelings, rather than acting out, so that you may respond appropriately.

5. Do the same with your kids. If it feels like they are making crazy demands, being especially needy, or seeking to manipulate you, ask them about their feelings and try to do so directly. Are they feeling threatened by your significant other? Are they terrified that if they show any kindness toward him or her, the other parent will punish them? Are they worried that they are losing you? Consider one on one time with each child. Even an hour can mean a lot.

6. Be patient with yourself. You are not perfect. And, let's face it, perfect people are dull. All that stuff that always drives you nuts during the holidays is still out there, in addition to your divorce. If you continue to circle back to Tip #1, you will find yourself starting the New Year without regrets.

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About the Author: Ms. De Shong is one of Pennsylvania's leading family law attorneys. She has counseled hundreds of men and women on all aspects of divorce, child custody, distribution of assets, support, and alimony, as well as property settlement agreements, prenuptial agreements, cohabitation and partnership agreements, family business agreements, protection from abuse matters, and more. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, a national organization of approximately 1,600 highly skilled litigators and negotiators who represent individuals in all areas of family law, and the Litigation Counsel of America, a national trial lawyer honorary society. If you would like further information about Ms. De Shong and family law, or if you have a family law matter that you would like to discuss with her, please email Ms. De Shong at adeshong@wispearl.com.

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