Creating Light in the “Dark Winter”

Expectations and Structure

By now we are all facing the reality that the structure of our holidays has changed. This winter our expectations will either set us up for disappointment and sorrow or for growth, joy, and adventure.

So much of our lives have been turned upside down to prevent the spread of COVID-19 or respond to its consequences. We are about to experience the impact of having life-long holiday traditions disrupted too. Some may not be able to anticipate the impact. We may not realize how much the structure of our holidays is ingrained in our unspoken expectations for our life or the lives of our children. During this unusual time, we can explore how our expectations for ourselves and our families can adjust too.

Creating Light: setting new expectations

1. Begin by identifying which expectations have become unrealistic. Some examples of expectations that may be unrealistic this year are … I will maintain a consistently positive attitude. I will be able to do it all for fewer people and with less help. Family will keep their initial promise to show up. I can spend what I have in the past this year. What brought me joy in the past will bring me joy this holiday season.

Unrealistic expectations can create negative feelings when our goals seem constantly out of reach.

2. Set expectations that are meaningful and achievable. Ones that…

- Are focused on the present
- Are within our control
- Are reasonable, practical, and achievable

new structures for your holidays

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Examples are … I will experience a moment of joy every day. I will try one new tradition that I do not have to continue next year. I will reach out to someone this holiday season that I haven’t taken the time to connect with in past years.

3. **Structure is the safety net for chaos.** That makes sense when thinking about how you dealt with past hectic holidays. This year we may experience a different kind of chaos—having lots of time on our hands. Creating structure for your holidays may be more important than ever. What sleep patterns will be best for you? When and how will you get regular exercise? How and when will you connect with family and friends? What is something new you can add to your day to honor your values?

4. **These unusual circumstances call for changing our expectations for our own behavior,** including practicing some “radical self-acceptance”—accepting our own humanity, including our challenges, without shame or blame, so that we have the resilience to pick up the pieces and try again later in the day or tomorrow. Practice self-forgiveness at the end of each day.

While these tips are focused on the holidays, they apply to these next months in general. It is natural for humans to slow down a bit in the darker days of winter. The impacts of the pandemic and political and social unrest have the potential to be more negative in a winter environment. How can meaningful and achievable expectations, set in a structured way, and supported by self-acceptance, help you to flourish this winter?

Let us join together in shifting our expectations to nourish our wellbeing during these next few months and give ourselves and those around us a little grace as we find our way.

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Learn more ways to “Create Light in the Dark Winter” with our other new blogs: **Boundaries; Compassionate Action Steps; Compassion Fatigue and Self-compassion; Mindfulness; and Stress Resilience.**