

# Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

## Mental Health Quick Notes

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### The Holiday Edition

*The "traditional" Holiday season beginning with Thanksgiving and ending with the celebration of New Year can be time filled with excitement and joy but can also be a time of sadness, loneliness, and great stress. We, at Riegler, Shienvold & Associates would like to wish you the best of the Holiday Season, and offer you a few tips for making this time of year enjoyable and less stressful.*

#### Holidays and Aging

by Ann C. Vergales, ACSW, LCSW

As people age, holiday celebrations become even more meaningful. Often, older people are more isolated from their families and friends because of physical and financial limitations. Naturally, as holidays approach and families plan their gatherings, older people eagerly anticipate the festivities, regardless of how their limitations affect their ability to actively participate. The key to maximum enjoyment for older people lies in careful planning. Here are some simple ideas that might make planning easier.

Avoid overeating by eating regular meals before attending parties and by making healthier choices from the menu.

Be creative in gift-giving by offering gifts of time to loved ones, or by encouraging family name-drawing so that expense is controlled. Gifts of family pictures can be a real hit.

Select how many gatherings to attend, and limit time at these, so as to conserve energy.

Enjoy the company of friends when family is too far away, as friendships can be just as meaningful as a means of reducing loneliness.

#### Avoiding Holiday Excesses

By Jeffrey Pincus, Ph.D.

Many people report difficulty avoiding excessive eating or drinking during the holiday season, often eating or drinking more than was intended and feeling bad about it later. If this has been a problem for you in the past, the following are some behavioral strategies to better help you manage:

--Use the "buddy system." If you are going to a party with a friend or partner, ask for help in leaving the party early enough to avoid excessive or unwanted eating or drinking. For example, your partner may mention to your hosts that he/she has to get up early tomorrow morning and therefore you both must leave the party at an early hour

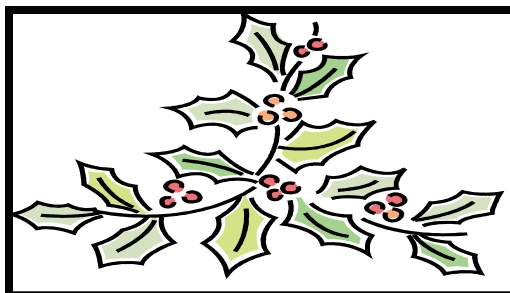
--Do not go to a party on an empty stomach. If you are hungry upon arrival, you will be more likely to eat impulsively and excessively when presented with an array of appetizers and snacks. Drinking alcohol on an empty stomach causes more sudden and higher blood alcohol levels, causing you to look, act and feel more intoxicated.

--If you are baking cookies for others as gifts or contributions to a party, prepare only enough to meet these needs. Avoid preparing extras for yourself.

-- If you go to an office party, remember that human resource professionals advise that supervisors often pay attention to how much their staff drinks. Having more than two standard-portion drinks could negatively affect your career, even if you do not get drunk.

--Keep a soft drink in your hand at all times. A glass of ginger ale looks identical to a glass of scotch and soda and there is no way to visually distinguish a glass of cola from a glass of rum and coke. No one will ask, "Can I get you a drink?" if there is a drink in your hand.

-- If you are at a party in a restaurant, seat yourself with your back to the bar. If you want to order a drink, order something served individual portions, such as a cocktail or bottle of beer. When people order beverages that come in communal portions (e.g. pitchers of beer or frozen daiquiris), there is a tendency for others to refill glasses, resulting in drinking more than planned.



#### Pregnancy or Infant Loss and the Holidays

By Amy K. Keisling, ACSW, LCSW

There are many ways in which a pregnancy or infant loss can occur. Whether due to an early miscarriage, elective abortion, fetal death or full-term stillbirth, the feelings of loss and grief can be profound. Holiday time can be particularly difficult, as the world seems to be swirling with activity - expressions of joy and cheer are everywhere.

The loss of a child is the loss of a fantasy: will it be a boy or girl, what will the child be like, how will I be as a parent, what will our family life be like? We create an image of the future that is lost when pregnancy or birth fails. Holiday time is also a time of fantasy: we strive to meet our expectations of what the holidays are all about. It's a time when family and children are in the forefront. For someone who has experienced a loss, exposure to this fantasy-in-action can be devastating. Visiting with family can bring questions and expressions of sympathy. There may be fears about seeing infants and becoming emotional.

It is impossible to cover all aspects of this type of loss in just a few paragraphs, but one thing is important across all experiences: it is vital for those grieving to take care of themselves. Getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercise are important. It can be meaningful to create a personal ritual or symbolic act to acknowledge the loss. Perhaps most important is being an advocate for oneself by setting boundaries on what activities are safe. It is ok to decide that an event is too much to handle, or seeing certain family members is too overwhelming. Pacing oneself and paying attention to the signs of exhaustion or emotional overload is key to getting through a difficult time. Knowing one's limits is a valuable tool.

#### Holiday Trivia Quiz

(see back for answers)

1. What holiday movie annually appears on TV over 300 times?
2. What does the word Kwanzaa mean?
3. One candle on the menorah is used to light the rest. What is its name?
4. Holly, commonly used around the Winter Solstice to decorate doors, windows and fireplaces, was historically used to do what?

## The Holiday Issue Cont.

**Holiday Gift-Giving and Kids**

By Tracy M. Richards, QCSW, LCSW

A lot of American parents feel the struggle between wanting to give their children all they desire for the holidays and, at the same time, not overindulging them. A 2005 holiday poll by The Center for A New American Dream found that 87% of Americans wanted a less materialistic holiday season. Findings concluded that nearly 3 in 4 Americans say that kids are too materialistic and the holiday season makes things worse. A 1998 study by American Demographic Magazine found that 96% of 8-12 year olds had a big screen TV on their holiday wish list. Interestingly, just a few short years before that, the Department of Education reported that 73% of parents wanted their children to watch TV less.

How have these realizations affected parents? A November 2006 ABC poll found that people are planning to spend 6% more on holiday shopping than last year. For the second year in a row, the most robust spending is occurring in families with children.

One might conclude that parents realize that materialism does not positively affect kids but, at the same time, many parents are spending more than ever. Why is there a disconnect? A 2002 national survey by the Center for a New American Dream found that adolescents, ages 12-17, will ask for advertised items nine times before parents acquiesced. One third of the kids surveyed reported feeling pressure to buy advertised items due to attempts to fit in with peers. Advertisers spent more than \$230 billion that year, specifically targeted to kids.

It seems that kids are being groomed to want material items on a daily, if not hourly, basis by their access to TV, billboards, magazines and the Internet. A lot of kids are deeply affected by this effort and will go to great lengths to nag their parents for what they want. What can parents do differently this holiday season? 1) Parents can make a proactive plan on what they want to give their children and refuse to be swayed; 2) Parents can plan activities that emphasize giving and helping others; 3) Parents can monitor TV closer during the holiday season so kids are not as manipulated; and, lastly 4) Parents can model, through their own behavior, giving to others and not focusing on their own material desires.

**Reducing Holiday Stress**

By Dyanne Sage, LCSW

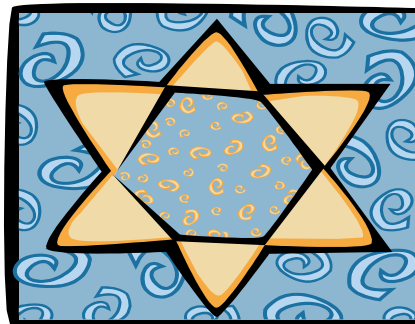
We know that the holidays can be a time of increased stress. The following tips are some practical and positive ways to take care of yourself during the holidays.

Avoid over-promising yourself - this is over-committing and promising to do more than possible. Let go of unnecessary responsibilities and events that your heart isn't into, and there may be more time and energy for yourself and loved ones.

Focus on the activities of the season, NOT THE FOOD. The key word is MODERATION and balancing all the rich, salty, sweet foods and extreme drinks. Continue to drink 6 to 8 glasses of water a day, keeping alcoholic beverages to a minimum. Do not drink and drive!

Enjoy some simple family time with a meal together. Play a board game or cards. Simplicity is the key - take time to be together without rushing and without super-preparations.

Everyone has social needs to one degree or another - spend time with your loved ones, cuddle a pet or reach out to someone with whom you may have lost contact. If you feel alone or stumped about how to fulfill your social quota - try visiting a retirement facility to experience the feeling of giving of yourself to others - you'll be surprised how much you benefit!!

**Holiday Trivia Answers**

1. It's a Wonderful Life
2. Fresh Fruits
3. The Shamash
4. To ward off evil spirits

**Sharing the Children During the Holidays**

By Arnold Shienvold, Ph.D.

Holiday time is generally stressful for all families. For families dealing with custody schedules it is even more stressful. Most custodial arrangements insure that children get to spend at least some time with each of their parent's families on the holiday and during the school recess time associated with the holiday. While clearly it is in the best interests of the children to do so, the logistics of the schedule may create additional stress for all concerned. Furthermore, the fact that holidays are now split into more than one part often requires a break in long held family traditions.

In order to navigate this time and to insure that the holidays remain a happy time for your children, it is important to prepare ahead of time for the holiday season. Additionally, focusing on the positive aspects of the holidays rather than dwelling on the inconveniences or losses that have been experienced will model a healthier attitude for everyone. In preparation for the holidays make sure that you and the child's other parent are in agreement as to who has what times during the holiday. Work-out all of the details regarding the transfer of custody in advance so that arguments and delays do not occur in front of the children. If your relationship with the other parent is good enough, coordinate your gift buying so that the children can receive those things that both of you feel are important. As with other aspects of your shared parenting responsibilities, if you remain child-centered in your decision-making the results of agreements are likely to be far more successful.

As noted, long held family traditions may need to change as a function of the custodial schedule. No longer will the whole family have dinner at grandma's house at 5:00 p.m. on Christmas, or the usual opening of gifts on Christmas Eve may need to change. You may not have the children every night of Hanukah, so the distribution of gifts may need to change. To deal with these changes, start new traditions that are created with the assistance of your children. If they are old enough, discuss with them how they would like the holiday to be celebrated. Integrating your children into a new tradition can be exciting and a great opportunity for closeness and closure of the past.

Finally, the holidays may evoke emotions of sadness and disappointment. These feelings are normal for you as the parent and for your children. Be supportive of your children's feelings and allow for their expression. Acknowledging and listening will help your children work through the difficult moments so that they can enjoy the rest of the time with you and your family.

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