

21 Tips to Survive Divorce and the Holidays

Dr. Karen Finn

The holidays are typically a time for celebration with friends and family. Yet, when you're divorcing, the holiday season can feel anything but merry. To help you enjoy this holiday season instead of dreading it, here are 21 tips you can use today to survive your divorce and the holidays.

1. Be patient

Even in the best of times, the holidays can be a bit hectic. However, when you're celebrating the holidays for the first time on your own, they can feel more than hectic. They can feel overwhelming! You've got so much going on emotionally with your divorce that the added tasks, events and scheduling of the holidays can all be just a bit too much.

Be patient with yourself, your kids and the rest of your family as you navigate the holidays. This is new and different for everyone and a little patience will go a long way toward making your first holidays post-separation/divorce more enjoyable than you might believe they can be right now.

2. Be flexible

The holidays are about celebrating with family and friends and don't HAVE to occur on only one specific day. Many of my clients who are celebrating the holidays for the first time as a single parent will get tied up with the idea that holidays can only happen on the official day marked on the calendar.

For example, it's not unusual for them to think that Thanksgiving Day can ONLY happen on the fourth Thursday of November (as it does here in the US). However, with a bit of advance planning (more about that in hint 16), you may decide that Thanksgiving will actually happen the Saturday before the fourth Thursday of November so you can celebrate it with your kids. Having an early Thanksgiving even has the added benefit of allowing you to avoid the crowd buying their last-minute turkey and fixings!

Think about it from your kids' point of view too. Most kids love the holidays and having double the holidays – one with Mom and one with Dad – might be something the kids think is great!

3. Focus on others

Another way to enjoy the holiday season is to focus on those less fortunate than you. Now I get there are times when you feel like the most unfortunate person around (at least that's how I felt at times when I was going through my divorce), but you really can survive your divorce and the holidays by being willing to recognize that it could be worse.

You might want to consider volunteering at a soup kitchen or at a center that provides holiday “shopping” for needy families. I can guarantee that when you focus on providing joy for those less fortunate than you an amazing thing happens; you forget about your troubles and appreciate what you do have even more.

4. It's not about the stuff!

Gift giving is often a big part of the holiday season. With separation and divorce, the funds available for gift giving are usually less than they were before. However, gifts don't need to be purchased to be appreciated. Sometimes the gift of time and attention means more than any store-bought gift ever could.

5. Let happiness happen

For a lot of people going through divorce, it can seem strange to experience any emotion other than some form of upset. Divorce is an upsetting event that can be almost all consuming. However, if you start to feel happy as a result of the holiday events, ENJOY the feeling! You deserve to be happy and enjoy the holidays just as much as everyone else does.

6. Reach out to family and friends

Almost everyone I know wishes someone could read their mind and offer help when it's needed. On the other hand, I don't know anyone who can read minds with any real reliability. The message here is if you need a little extra help to get your holidays to feeling merrier, be sure and ask for it. Don't wait for someone to guess what you need because there's a chance that they might not guess correctly.

7. Make new family traditions

With divorce so many things change. Some of these changes are not so comfortable, but some of these changes are good and might even be fun. What new family tradition can you introduce this holiday season to keep things fun?

When I got divorced, my new tradition was spending Christmas with my family. We had almost always spent Christmas with my in-laws when I was married to my first husband. I've had fun spending the holidays with my parents, siblings, and their families since then.

8. Nix the guilt

So many divorced parents feel guilty about how the kids' holidays will be different. The thing is different doesn't necessarily mean bad or wrong. Different is just different. If you nix the guilt and embrace the new way your holidays will be, then your kids will enjoy the holidays too. After all, if the kids are now having double the celebrations it's worth making sure they're having fun with you even if it is different.

9. Work with your ex in a cooperative manner for the kids' sake

One of the things I always tell my clients is that their divorce is between them and their former spouse. The holidays can be a wonderful experience for the kids provided that's the shared goal you and your former spouse have for them.

I know of one couple who have agreed for the kids' dad to have them for the holidays because his parents are still around and hers aren't. She celebrates the holidays with the kids at another time.

The result? Everyone's able to make the most of the holidays!

10. Continue your traditions, but simplify them

You may have holiday traditions that are important to you, but they just are not possible now that you're divorced. What can you do to tweak these traditions so that you can still have them?

For example, maybe you have had a holiday tradition of going skiing. If that kind of a trip isn't possible this year, you may choose to do something else that captures the essence of the traditional ski trip. You may decide to play ski jumping on the Wii, have a marshmallow fight instead of a snowball fight and drink hot chocolate afterwards. Let your creativity flow and I know you'll be able to create a modified tradition this year that you'll still enjoy.

11. Don't spend the holidays alone

It can be tempting to crawl into a cave and hibernate during our first holidays alone – especially if your ex has the kids. However, I urge you to resist the temptation. There's no reason to punish yourself, for that's what hiding in a cave during the holidays is. I'm not saying that you don't need time alone. You very well might. I'm just suggesting that instead of spending all of the holiday season alone, make an effort to go out and spend some time with others. I promise that you'll get a different perspective of your first holidays as a re-single person if you open yourself up to even a little fun celebrating the holidays with others.

12. Take care of your health

The funny thing about the holiday season is that it coincides with the cold and flu season. This, along with the stress that usually accompanies divorce, makes you a bit more susceptible to catching a bug. So, take good care of yourself by getting plenty of rest, adequate exercise and good nutrition (in addition to all the holiday goodies).

13. Give yourself a gift

This being the first holiday season post separation/divorce, chances are you won't be receiving a gift from your ex. You probably won't be buying them a gift either.

Since your gift giving list has decreased by at least one, why not add yourself to your list? If you do, you'll be able to buy yourself something that you'll truly enjoy this holiday season. (You may

also want to make sure it's not something that you'll regret purchasing in the New Year when the payments for it start!)

14. Count your blessings

It's easy to get caught up in what's different this holiday season – in the negative sense.

If that's happening to you, flip that upside down and count what's different AND positive this holiday season. Maybe you don't have to listen to your ex's Uncle Jeremiah's continual belching during the holiday meal or suffer through listening to the never-ending story of all your former mother-in-law's aches and pains.

15. Lean on your faith

Whatever your beliefs are, you just might be able to find solace in your faith when you're not feeling the "Ho Ho Ho!" in the holidays. For many, the holidays are a celebration of faith and spending some time remembering this might be just what you need to experience a bit more of the holiday spirit.

16. Plan ahead

The most important thing to have when you want something to happen at a certain time is a plan. Wanting to have happy holidays requires a plan too. The plans don't have to be elaborate or come with a detailed time table of when events must happen. But, by giving some thought to what you want to have happen and then doing what needs to be done will make it more likely you'll have a happy holiday season.

17. Cultivate gratitude

Developing an attitude of gratitude does wonders for the way you view the world. This was one of the most important skills I developed when I got divorced. It helped me to be more positive and proactive about changing the things that needed to be changed not just at the holidays, but year-round. (It's also a skill I continue to use today more than 10 years later.)

What are you thankful for this holiday season?

18. What do you love most about the holiday season?

People like the cooler weather, giving and receiving gifts, decorations. Whatever it is that you love most about the holiday season, figure out a way to get more of it. Once you do that, you'll definitely have happier holidays.

19. What activities put you in the holiday mood?

When I ask my clients this question I hear answers like shopping, parties, decorating, watching football, Christmas lights and caroling. The next question I ask them is "How can you do more of these and get even more enjoyment out of the holiday season?"

So, what activities put you in the holiday mood?

Now, how can you do more of these?

20. Be realistic

Your life is in the midst of a major change. For most people, separation and divorce bring increased responsibilities along with decreased financial means and free-time. Be sure and factor these facts in this holiday season. If you do, I'll bet you'll find it easier to be realistic with the expectations you have of yourself, your family and the holidays this year. (It will also make it easier to develop realistic plans. See tip 16.)

21. One holiday at a time

The holiday season can easily be a blur of activities that pretty much start as soon as the jack-o-lantern is off the front porch on the morning of November 1st. Prevent the blur by focusing on just one holiday at a time. Avoid multi-tasking and the potential for overwhelm by taking the holidays just as they come, one...at...a...time.

Your Assignment To Survive Divorce And The Holidays:

Choose one of the tips to implement immediately. Sometimes seeing a long list of tips can cause us to start to gloss over them. I know these tips work, so take a moment now and choose one of them that you can implement right now and then do it!

Choose a tip that addresses your biggest concern about the holidays and put it to use. It's pretty normal for the tip that can be most helpful to not necessarily be the easiest to implement. If that's the case for you, take a moment now and select the tip that would address your biggest concern. And, when you're ready, take a deep breath and figure out how you can implement that tip to help you enjoy your holidays just a bit more.

Come back to the tips frequently throughout the holiday season. Just because you've tried a tip out once doesn't mean that you're done with it. Keep these tips handy and visit them throughout the holidays anytime you could use a little bit of help.

I'm Dr. Karen Finn, a divorce coach and advisor helping people just like you who are dealing with the stress and pain of divorce. You can join my newsletter list for free weekly advice or email me directly for a free consultation at Karen@functionaldivorce.com