



TRANSITIONING TRADITIONS

Once again, it's time to plan for the holidays. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year's all bring families together, with the attendant joys and stresses.

Many of the stresses may come from trying to sustain traditions that have been repeated over the years through several generations. You may also find that these traditions have gradually grown to intimidating proportions, through happy events such as the combining of families, or unfortunate events like divorce (with both sides expecting you for dinner). It may also be a sad time as you miss those who have passed away.

I suspect you'll find if you look back over the years, that you have actually changed your rituals at times for practical reasons, such as not wanting to travel 5 hours with a screaming baby, or living too far away to justify the expense or traveling hassles. Very likely, over time you've made several adjustments due to changes in your extended family's lives, as well as your own. It may be time again to evaluate family traditions to see what works and what doesn't at this time of your life. What parts of holiday traditions do you most look forward to? What do you dread? What adjustments need to be made? Do you need to break an 8-hour drive into two parts, or go a day earlier to avoid traffic and have a recovery day? Is it time to ask family to help prepare the meal? Would it be better to stay in a nearby hotel, so you aren't awakened by your son's dogs at 5 am?

This review is especially relevant if you have a family member with dementia, which can progress significantly over the course of a year, requiring a different paradigm for celebrating together. Does s/he know the date and the people attending the event? Are they able to cope emotionally with the scene? What does that person enjoy and what does he or she find stressful? While you may like having the football game on all afternoon, a person with hearing loss or dementia may find it noisy and overwhelming, cutting him or her off from conversation and potentially causing agitation. Stress can be reduced by limiting stimulation, creating a quiet retreat space, or by ensuring opportunities to connect with familiar touchstones. If practical, it may be better to return the person to a familiar bed rather than having a family sleep-over, or make sure he or she has a familiar comfort quilt if away from home. Plan some down-time. Be prepared with alternate plans, such as taking

someone home early, or taking over a full left-over meal the next day. It may be that a phone call or video conference is as much connection as the person can handle. Another option is to have various family members take turns attending to the family member, prepared to leave the table, help with mobility, carry the conversation, so no one person feels the full responsibility.

I remember the year we moved Thanksgiving dinner from my parents' home to mine to take some of the load off my mother. Another year we celebrated Christmas on December 28th when my son returned from a semester in Prague. Last year we brought my parents to our house for a light Christmas lunch and an early dinner rather than a long, full day. This year as their dementia and frailty grow, I'm considering further simplifications, such as a few short visits over the weekend, with just a couple family members each time. I know that my parents say that being with family is most important, but that anything with more than a few people for a short visit is overwhelming and stressful.

As you do your holiday planning, consider what parts you enjoy most and what you are dreading. Ask yourself whose need it is to follow all the rituals—is it you trying to keep things normal rather than accepting the "new normal?" What is really most important to you? Talk to your family about what you need, and try to devise creative adjustments to the rituals to make them more pleasurable for everyone. You may find you're able to avoid conflict and disappointment if you discuss your concerns and needs ahead of time. Rest assured, these traditions will continue to evolve in the future as well.
Happy Holidays!

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