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Healthy Living: Holidays may add to heartache of divorce

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Mark Huffman suffers sleepless nights. He buys himself new slacks and furniture he doesn't need just to get out of the house.

He canceled his traditional Christmas trip to visit family in Connecticut; he can barely sit through a commercial featuring Santa.

Huffman is going through a divorce this **holiday** season.

"My family is now broken, and Christmas is about a family," said Huffman, a 38-year-old logistics analyst for a pharmaceutical company, who has a 9-year-old son.

He will see his child the second half of Christmas Day.

"I almost feel bad taking him away in the middle of the day," said Huffman, a child of divorce himself. "Like if he is having fun opening gifts with his cousins and other people, maybe he should just stay there."

There is never a good time for divorce. But separating over the **holidays** can intensify negative feelings and heartache. Fractured families are constantly reminded of what is lost -- from a Christmas photo card of a seemingly perfect family arriving in the mailbox to the wintertime barrage of **holiday** movies.

Watching Rudolph just isn't the same when you are alone on the couch.

More than 650,000 Georgians have been divorced, according to the 2000 census, with the number steadily rising. In 1970, there were 18,649 divorces in Georgia. In 1999, the number of divorces jumped to 34,227, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. While Huffman of Lawrenceville and hundreds of others across metro Atlanta find comfort in a growing number of free divorce support groups, many are stunned by the ambush of emotions this time of year.

Laura Petherbridge, who leads a local divorce recovery program, recently drafted a survival guide to the **holidays** for people suffering a divorce. Petherbridge, who divorced in 1984, recommends newly separated men and women anticipate emotional triggers and avoid spending the **holidays** alone.

Positive affirmation

She also encourages people to nurse their wounds by lighting candles, taking walks or renting a funny movie.

"You need to know someday you will stop crying -- as long as you make good choices," said Petherbridge, who lives in Flowery Branch. "If you spiral down and just kind of wallow in your grief, you will keep crying."

Margot Swann created Visions Anew Institute in 1998 shortly after her own divorce to help empower women left emotionally fragile from a divorce. The nonprofit divorce recovery organization provides seminars and support groups to more than 400 women every year. She worries that many women devastated by a divorce quietly suffer and self-destruct in December.

"There is so much shame and so much fear that some women just curl themselves into a roll in bed," she said.

Vinings psychotherapist and divorce coach Diane "D.D" Petters urges people to combat dark thoughts by writing a positive affirmation and posting it everywhere -- on the refrigerator, on the bathroom mirror, and in the car -- until it is memorized.

"When you hear those negative thoughts, say: 'I am a strong, loving, kind person and I deserve good things in my life,' " she said.

Petters, who divorced eight years ago, said attempting to cling onto old traditions is futile in the wake of such change.

New traditions

She recommends newly divorced people celebrate the **holidays** differently, whether it's a first ride on the Pink Pig at Lenox Square mall or a new ice skating experience at Centennial Olympic Park. Change **holiday** routines, she also suggests. Listen to new Christmas music or none at all. Shop at a new mall or buy gifts online.

"Some people feel stuck because they don't know how to do Christmas without their spouse," Petters said. "Create new memories. . . . We can't control what happens to us but we can control our response. Gain a sense of control instead of being helpless."

Petters said the biggest mistake is rushing into a relationship to help limp through the **holidays**. "Until you've grieved this relationship, you are putting a Band-Aid on," Petters said.

Bari Tuman, who divorced three years ago, spent her first Thanksgiving post-divorce with her kids at Disney World, but she maintained other traditions important to her children, such as visiting the lights at Life University. Tuman said her two children, now 14 and 12, were grief-stricken during the first **holiday** season.

"It's almost like faking your way through it," Tuman said. "We just did a lot of talking and they expressed a lot of sadness."

Helping others

Tuman said volunteering during the **holidays** has been a major source of healing. Petters is Jewish, but Christmas Day was still a special family day of eating takeout and renting movies. After her divorce, she decided to spend the day volunteering at a hospital, fetching ice and giving blankets to patients.

"Each year brings new challenges, but I have learned that I am resilient," Tuman said. "I have learned that I am not only a survivor, but a thriver and that lesson spills over to my children. . . . What a gift."

Graphic: SURVIVAL GUIDE

- Review the calendar and pinpoint the days or events that could trigger melancholy.
- Accept the difficulty of this time of year and your loss. Remind yourself that it's a season and it will pass.
- Take care of your physical well-being.
- Create new traditions. This could include handmade gifts, visiting a nursing home, or any act of charity.
- Review the visitation schedule with your ex-spouse and the children at least one week in advance. This helps relieve any fears the children may be experiencing.
- Let your children grieve. They need you to listen.
- Help the children buy a small gift for your ex-spouse and ex-in-laws. This communicates your permission to love the other family.
- Note: If you are in a deep depression and thoughts of suicide are intense, seek help immediately. Have the phone number of your counselor, pastor, church, close friend or hotline already taped to your phone.
- Source: Laura Petherbridge
- SUPPORT GROUPS

- Laura Petherbridge is the director of the divorce recovery support group at Crossroads Community Church on Ga. 20 in Lawrenceville near the Mall of Georgia. The support group meets 7-9 p.m. Thursdays but will not meet over the **holidays**. It resumes meeting on Jan. 15. For more information, call 770-822-1121.
- The Visions Anew Institute support groups (for women only) meet 6:30-8:30 p.m. on the first and third Wednesdays at Mountain View Library at 3320 Sandy Plains Road, Marietta, and on the second and fourth Fridays at the East Cobb Government Service Center, 4400 Lower Roswell Road. Beginning in February, Visions Anew will start a support group at the Junior League headquarters at 3154 Northside Parkway; it will meet 10 a.m.-noon on the first and third Fridays. For more information about Visions Anew, call 770-953-2882 or go to its Web site at visionsanew.org.
- More than 100 churches in metro Atlanta offer divorce support. To find the one nearest you, go to www.divorcecare.org and type in your ZIP code.