

Dealing with holiday downsizing

BETH FIRESTEIN
UNCOMMON SENSE

Question: Money is a big issue in our family these days. In the past, we used to buy gifts for immediate family members, close friends and even a few neighbors and the postman that brings our mail. Now that our income has been cut in half due to layoffs and payments on credit card debt, we can't afford to give as generously as we used to, but I don't want the people I care about to feel left out or unimportant.

Answer: I'm guessing that you have a lot of people in your boat, and their boat is weighed down just as much as yours. Even for those who haven't lost jobs or had major cuts in income, the fear and stress of that possibility are there. Just ask them.

There are three issues that intertwine with your dilemma. The first issue is socioeconomic class and how "have-mores" relate to "have-lesses" around times of holiday celebrations and gift giving. The second issue concerns expectations of yourself and others and the need to be sure those are realistic in light of your changed circumstances. The third issue involves clarifying what you wish to express to those you care about and what the holidays mean to you and those you love.

Socioeconomic differences are generally a taboo subject for most people. We all know people in our personal, social and work lives who have more money or social standing than we do and others who have less. It's hard to go from having more to having less in your own family. Often, it means not being able to do what you have been

able to do for others in the past. This year, think about giving non-material "gifts" to those you appreciate: notes of appreciation, a home-cooked meal, or the invitation to spend time together sharing a meal or seeing a movie. Our time and thoughtfulness are really some of the best gifts we can give.

Next, examine your expectations. They come in two forms: the expectations we have of others and the expectations we put upon ourselves. Think about your expectations of others. I'm guessing that you probably don't require as much material giving from those you care about as you may expect yourself to give to them, especially if you have had the means to do so. Working with our expectations and really asking ourselves whether our expectations are realistic can lead to a re-evaluation and revision that can make the situation less stressful for you and your family.

Third, your changed circumstances provide a really valuable opportunity to reflect on what the holidays mean to you and what it is that you want to communicate when you give to others. Giving material or monetary gifts can be one way of saying "I care about you, I appreciate you, and I want to give you something of myself during the holidays," but these same messages can be communicated in many forms. Use your creativity to create new, non-monetary ways of being generous. The possibilities are endless.

Question: I have a brother that committed suicide three years ago around this time of year. Ever since then, the holidays have been awful. Every-

one around me seems to be enjoying the season, but I just get sad, depressed and feel more left out when everyone around me seems to be celebrating. I don't know how to deal with these feelings and I wonder if they will ever get better.

Answer: Suicide is one of those "unspeakable" topics, and the suicide of a family member can haunt us for years or decades, whether the death occurred during the holiday season or at some other time of year. Certainly, holidays, birthdays and anniversaries are times when grief can come to the surface strongly, evoking memories, feelings and regrets. Three years is not a long time when it comes to dealing with the death of a family member, and deaths involving suicide are especially difficult.

For most people suffering this kind of loss, the first year of the person's death is the hardest and the first year after their death is just about equally as hard. Often the intensity of the emotional pain decreases in small increments as the years pass. You are still relatively close to the loss. I do believe the feelings will get better, though the holidays may always evoke some sadness for you and your family that others might not have to feel. There are a couple of ways to help get ourselves through those first

tough years.

You might consider a yearly tradition of honoring your brother. You can do this in more than one way. For example, you might deliberately organize a part of the holiday as a time to remember and talk about your brother, reflecting on what he brought into the lives of family and friends. This may be a somber time of grieving or a time of joyful remembering, but often it is both. Some people choose to create a memory area in the family room during the holidays with photos of their loved one or a couple of their favorite items sitting out, creating a "place" for your brother even though he is no longer physically present.

You can also remember your brother by giving a special gift of your time or money to a cause he believed in as a way of honoring him and his values. Making foods he loved or watching a favorite holiday film are other ways of including him in the thoughts and actions of the family. You need not to dwell in the sadness, but neither is it necessary to "forget" your brother in order to enjoy the holidays. There is enough room in our hearts for both sorrow and joy at this time of year ... and every time of year. May you have a holiday filled with peace and gentleness.



UNCOMMON SENSE WITH BETH FIRESTEIN

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