

'Tis the Season to be Jolly...or is it?

'Tis the season to be jolly, or is it? For a child growing up in the home of an alcoholic, any holiday season is fraught with painful memories of years gone by when the season was anything but joyous.

Even as an adult, living away from the situation, the alcoholic can still have a strong hold on how one perceives the holidays. For many years, I was unaware that just turning the calendar to "December" was enough of a trigger to cause my body to go through 1400 physical & chemical reactions. These reactions produce a host of side-effects which can leave us feeling anxious, worn out & unable to enjoy life. Their purpose is to prepare the body for flight or fight and if untransformed, can impact our memory, decision-making & problem-solving skills. They are not to be taken lightly. Cortisol, "the stress hormone", is connected to a variety of serious illnesses, which may not show up for decades.

Merry-making is ramped up during this season of peace & joy, which makes it difficult for the alcoholic to avoid the drinks scene. Despite vowing to abstain or limit the alcohol intake, there is extreme pressure to consume. "Aww, c'mon, one drink won't hurt." "It's the holidays. Live a little!" For someone who is addicted, it doesn't take much encouragement before they're raising a glass or the bottle.

This type of atmosphere is tough on everyone. It creates a state of hyper-vigilance or acute awareness, where one is always **alert**, wondering when the next big explosion will take place. A myriad of emotions are felt: Disappointment - "Not again." Hope - "This year it will be different." Anger - "Why can't this stop!" Blame - "If only I were prettier/smarter/better/more lovable...."

Living in an alcoholic home means that there is a lot of conditioning that takes place, often at a young age. The amygdala is a small gland in the brain that is responsible for emotional memory. In prehistoric times, it allowed us to learn that the sabre-toothed tiger was a threat to our lives and that we had to beware or be eaten.

In an alcoholic home there is repeated exposure to fear-producing events, thus causing a strong association to things that remind us of that time. As we go through life, the amygdala continues to look for matches and when it finds something that is close enough, will prepare our body for the stress response – flight or fight. The trigger is often imperceptible – it could be the sound of someone's voice, ice in a glass, a certain expression on someone's face or the sight of a particular decoration.

Unless we are aware that we are reacting to a trigger, we can experience a wide range of less-than-seasonal feelings which can include, but are not restricted to depression, regret, loneliness and anger.

For me, the awareness that my amygdala is looking for a match, of which the Christmas season means plenty, has made an impact upon my healing. Now that I know that a lot of the negative feelings are side-effects to the stress response, I can usually catch them in time and transform them with heart-activated feelings.

I know that the changing of the calendar no longer means "danger". I also know that the Christmas gatherings I now attend do not end in fights, nor does anyone end up in tears. I do not have to scan the faces of my loved ones to see what kind of mood they're in and how I should react in light of that mood.

This has been a process of learning and growing and one that I continue to use on a daily basis. It also helps to know that I can have an effect on my “internal pharmacy” by choosing my thoughts and emotions. When I choose to activate positive emotions, I know that I am changing my heart rhythms – the smoother the heart rhythms the better I feel. The better I feel, the better I do. When our mood changes for the better, all the little things that bothered us fall away and we live our lives in a way that is resourceful for us. We make wiser decisions and we are in a better position to share the gift that is ourself with others.

In an old pattern of thinking and feeling? Consider the fact that you've **noticed** what you are doing and that you are looking to make some changes by replacing your old behaviours with new ones. That's a big step in itself and one that is worth appreciating and celebrating. Be patient and stick with it, the rewards are well worth the effort.

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