

“Can’t you just be normal for one day?” More thoughts on PTSD and holidays

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One of the perennial problems trauma survivors face is the request, usually from family members around holiday times, “Can’t you just be normal for one day?”

The answer is no.

The answer is “I am normal for what I have been through.”

Trauma survivors pay a price for what they have suffered. This price is not rescinded just because it is a holiday. The answer is “I went through hell, and holidays bring up a lot of pain. No. I cannot be normal, as you call it. I am normal for what I have been through.”

Part of the pain induced by the request to be normal is the unspoken assumption that you could be normal for a day if you just tried hard enough. Suzette Hadin Elgin in her book, *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* (Dorsett, 1980), calls this a presupposition. Other presuppositions in that statement are that it is wrong not to act like everybody else, that other people’s happiness depends on what you do, that holidays must be celebrated by everyone in the same way, and that trauma shouldn’t affect you, or should only affect you in ways that the other person finds tolerable.

“Can’t you just be normal for one day?” is a verbal attack, although the person doing the attacking probably does not identify it as such. It is couched in terms of sweet reason, but it carries a heavy burden of denial of what the survivor has been through and of the problems the person doing the requesting has in meeting his or her own needs through a variety of other sources, which is why he or she is trying to make the survivor meet them.

Of course, if the trauma survivor spends the rest of the year denying that

he or she has problems and refusing to get help, wanting to have special needs over the holidays can be pretty irritating to the rest of the family. If you are doing that, you might want to face your problems and look for some good help.

Families and friends pay a price for living with a trauma survivor. Sometimes it is painful, but any relationship has pain. We feel survivors are worth the pain. We can acknowledge our pain without having to blame the survivor. This is just how it is. As families, we are different. That difference does not have to remain a negative. It takes strength to survive trauma. It takes strength to survive living with a trauma survivor. We are strong, but our strengths do not lie in conventional holiday celebrations. We need to create our own ways of celebrating survival and recovery which may be quite different from shop-till-you-drop, Christmas crowds at the house, or going over to the houses of relatives who discount and demean trauma survivors.

Each of us can think about what we can do for ourself. Is there some small way you can be there for yourself in ways you haven’t been in the past, even if it is only staying sober or allowing yourself some quiet time? What can you do for the parts of you you may have lost during the trauma or the parts of you you have ignored while living with a trauma survivor? What can you do for other survivors, for other families and friends of survivors? One thing is to pass out last year’s article on PTSD and Holidays. A copy is enclosed. You have permission to make copies of it.

Perhaps this year the trauma survivor and family and/or friends can sit down

and discuss how they can create meaningful celebrations. Is there something the trauma survivor would like to do with or for the rest of the family? Starting small is a good idea if you are going to try to change. In my experience, every time I tried to do too much or tried to change quickly, I failed. I strongly recommend very small, low key changes, things that seem like they won’t be a trigger. Have a backup plan for the survivor if he or she is triggered.

Broken promises can create very hard feelings, so I suggest not making promises or asking for them. Making someone promise to do something is also a form of coercion, an attempt to control, and with trauma survivors it can backfire. They need to regain a sense of control in their lives. Extracting promises only gives them something to rebel against.

Sometimes survivors are also controlling, extracting promises from family or friend. It is understandable but it carries the same drawbacks. If we need to stop focusing on the trauma survivor and let him or her heal, we, too, need the freedom to meet our own needs. We should have back-up plans so we can enjoy things even if the survivor has to bow out at the last minute. Yes, we do deserve to go to the Nutcracker, to a movie, to a service, to a tree lighting, a party, or any other treat we have planned—by ourselves or with another friend—if the survivor can’t make it. We do not have to stay home.

—Happy Holidays from

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