

# INCIID Insights Nov. 2006: Oh No Not the Holidays by Helen Adrienne

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**Oh, No, Not the Holidays!**  
By [Helen Adrienne, LCSW, BCD](#)

I don't want to buy any presents. I don't want to go to your family. I don't want to go to my family. I don't want to shove myself full of fattening food when I feel like a kielbasa from these hormones. I don't want to see my nieces and nephews. I don't feel like setting up any damn tree or menorah. I don't want to go to any parties....

Sound familiar? These are just a few of the feelings that can be considered absolutely normal if one is at any stage of diagnosis or treatment for the difficulty you are having in trying to conceive. Any and all feelings and their intensity at this time of year can be boiled down to a predominant issue: I don't want to participate in forced gayety.

Your situation hurts. You are not happy. And it is extremely costly emotionally to pretend that you are. It is common for family and friends to be uncomfortable with your unhappiness at this time of year. No doubt, they wish that they had a magic wand. But if they cannot make you happy, then if you could pretend, they would not have to feel powerless to fix your problem. They love you and they don't want to feel powerless to help you. Somehow, at holiday time, the notion that you are doing everything in your power to fix your problem is not enough. At holiday time, the world conspires to expect everyone to be on a high.

To feel so out of sync with the world is a dreadful feeling. But just like any feeling that can be poisonous, there can be an antidote. What might yours be?

Look at the possibilities. To melt into your spouse or partner for solace is the first thing that comes to mind. Optimally, you can capitalize on the fact that you have each other. How can you make the holiday special? How can you use time off from work to distract yourselves from the consuming nature of the quest for parenthood? How can you get to feel entitled to setting limits to people and historic expectations and obligations? Those of you who have parents who are not self-involved or rigid, have parents who will respect your decisions as a couple to stray from the tradition.

But what if your family doesn't have the capacity for the respect that you need? And what if you and your partner are not on the same page? What if you do not have adequate communication skills? At this time and under these circumstances, it would be best if you cut to the chase and schedule a session with a professional who can help you navigate these choppy waters.

Another possibility is to ask yourselves if it would soothe the savage breast to use mental muscle to dive into the holiday festivities - a kind of "fake it 'til you make it" approach. Could you let go of what's missing in your life and grab onto whatever you do have that you are grateful for? This would be a more likely possibility for those who have families who do not use the holiday as an excuse to heighten conflicts. This kind of tension at the holidays is a nightmare for the fertile world as well, and it is more common than you might imagine.

If it is your inclination to brave it through because you can trust that the family get-together will be tension-free, it would be important to keep in mind that the quest for parenthood is not a forever quest, even though it may seem that way to you now. At times like this when the emotional demands of treatment can leave one feeling that time is very unkind - every hour seeming like a day, every day seeming like a year -

it's hard to keep in sight that you will be parents one day. In the panoramic view, very few of you who are longing for a child, decide to choose child-free living. And my experience has taught me that those who at first feel forced to grieve the loss of the pregnancy route to procreation and build a family by way of adoption do not stay trapped in the grieving mind-set once the decision is made. Many years ago, the first couple I worked with who moved on to adoption said to me upon bringing home their daughter, "Helen, we could not have done better ourselves. Look at her. She's perfect." This is not to say that you would never again think about the fact that you couldn't conceive, but with the success of the adoption process comes the shift to the demands and joys of parenting. The same can be said for moving on to any third-party form of reproduction.

Information is notorious as an anxiety reducer. Therefore, a third antidote to the holiday blues is the understanding and absorption of this next perspective. For sure, infertility provokes...I daresay demands... emotional growth. Those couples who seem to have the most difficulty are those who resist the need to adapt their thinking to acceptance of this unwanted reality. Paradoxically, with acceptance, the path can be smoother.

The place where emotional growth can happen can be easily identified. Every time you feel yourself at a place where you feel emotionally overwrought, you have an opportunity to put that moment under a magnifying glass and study it. If whatever it is that represents your typical response is not working, then you have a chance to change. It takes an enormous amount of restraint at a point when you are most vulnerable and just want to give vent to your upset, to ask yourself "what can I do or feel that is different from my same ol' response?" Yet, the thrill of discovering your options (growth) is very empowering.

Now imagine a chart of emotional growth. Imagine that the vector goes from lower left to upper right. But the route from here to there goes up and down between the start and end points, victories (up) being followed by defeats (down), but ultimately ending at a higher place than you started. This up and down growth pattern is universal and unavoidable. I can guarantee that circumstances and logistics will intrude upon this process under normal circumstances, but the holiday season can be deadly. You're doing and feeling fine one minute, but the potential to be blindsided the next minute by so many things, great and small, is enormous. Here's where you need to keep your sights and energies on the decided-upon change and not energize the intrusions which will magnify if you cannot resist their gravitational force. Much of what feels awful about the holiday season feels awful to people in the fertile world as well. But for you, the demands of the holiday season can leave you feeling totally depleted at a time when you need Herculean strength not to succumb to this gravitational force. Every time you resist a provocation to lose your grip on growth, you create an opportunity to turn defeat into victory.

A fourth antidote to the strain of the holiday season is self-relaxation. This morning I received a panicked phone call from a patient who was in an understandable frenzy. She felt a huge pressure to accomplish a gigantic task in a short period of time with predictable intrusions that were beyond her control. I invited her to sit in front of a clock with a second hand and to allow herself to breathe deeply and slowly for 60 seconds. I would be quiet on my end of the phone. At the end of the minute, she reported being shocked by how much better she felt. She had stopped shaking and felt ready to engage in her task with a reconnection to her inner strength and resources. It's easy to forget that we have a built-in palliative mechanism with us at all times – our breath. If you can remember that you have this option, it can easily move you from feeling overwhelmed to feeling empowered.

Under the best of circumstances, the diagnosis and treatment of infertility sends most normal people on an emotional trip into the ionosphere. And the holidays often fling people into a different solar system altogether. The perspective I have endeavored to bring to you in this article is designed to give each of you a reminder

that if you are hurled into an emotional frenzy, you can come back down to earth whether it be by connection to your partner, connection to your family and friends, connection to a growth process or simply connection to your own breath. And if you are solidly planted enough, even the sound of jingle bells cannot disturb the vector toward maturation in the face of adversity.

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