Dateless on New Year's Eve?

Don't Agonize - Mobilize!

By Theresa Wright, Ph.D.

**Names have been changed for privacy*

The hustle, the bustle, the holiday cheer! 'Tis the season! But if you find yourself suddenly single or chronically on your own, the holidays need not be approached with dread, or experienced as an exercise in pain-management while anxiously counting down to January 2nd. Alone is not synonymous with lonely!

In her study for her book, *The New Single Woman*, Kay Trimberger reports that, contrary to the popular stereotype, middle-aged single women experience little holiday loneliness and angst. The key is to develop a strong support network among extended family and friends. Regardless of your marital status, the holidays offer you an opportunity to connect with loved ones and enjoy the extended time-off to indulge and pamper yourself.

Take a proactive approach to the holidays. Don't be passive and allow them to happen around you. Planning is essential in creating enjoyable holiday experiences. Empower yourself by recognizing that you have many choices available to you. For instance, the holidays are defined as a gift-giving season, so give yourself a gift! Consider buying yourself that luxury item you've been wanting. Purchase an enjoyable book or movie; give yourself a manicure or pedicure. Engage in a new activity like skiing or scuba diving! Consider taking a trip by yourself, with a friend or join a singles tour. Perhaps you've been contemplating doing charity work. Now's the time to volunteer at a soup kitchen or animal shelter. You'd be surprised at how much bringing joy to others can bring joy to you. You might even develop new friendships among like-minded fellow volunteers.

The reason for your singleness brings with it differing challenges. In the case of divorce, women are faced with a profound sense of loss and family-centered holidays can magnify these feelings. So it's important to create new traditions or modify old ones. After 15 years of marriage, Bonnie*, a mother of two young children, found herself struggling in the aftermath of her divorce. The holidays had always been fairly predictable. Gift-giving at her parents' home followed by a festive evening at her in-laws. New Year's Eve had always been celebrated at the home of a couple they'd known since college. The divorce brought a change in these traditions requiring her to "split the time" with her children. She communicated with her ex and minimized conflict for the sake of the children, then made plans in advance for both herself and her time with the children, allowing her to more fully enjoy the holidays. Although it was a difficult adjustment, Bonnie was able to navigate the holidays by working with the circumstances of her situation rather than attempting to recreate holidays past. In the event you've been single for some time, access your support system. Jean*, a 48-year-old woman who's never been married, hosts a "Spirit Day" party each year, inviting women from all areas of her life - family friends, neighbors and work associates. The only requirement is a bottle of wine, an appetizer and good cheer to share with others.

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This season brings heightened expectations of ourselves and others because of family obligations and holiday rituals. Given the demanding nature of December, it's all the more important for women to practice self-care. Unfortunately, the more stress we experience, the less likely we are to engage in self-soothing activities that would serve to alleviate our distress. Furthermore, if you allow yourself to become depleted by meeting unreasonable self-imposed expectations, you'll be opening the door to negative thinking, inviting in the "shoulds." "I should be in a relationship," "I should be with my children/family," "Everyone else is out on New Year's Eve with a date having a great time." Don't should yourself! This type of thinking perpetuates a self-defeating atti-

tude which will interfere with your ability to make the most of your holidays. Eat, drink and be merry - in moderation. Take the time and make the effort to eat healthy, exercise and most of all, relax.

It's important that you recognize your limits. Don't force yourself to participate in a holiday activity for the sole purpose of pleasing others at the expense of your own emotional well-being. If you're invited to a New Year's Eve party populated with couples and it would make you feel uncomfortable, then by all means be kind to yourself and create an enjoyable alternative. Host your own intimate affair with friends and acquaintances. Or, curl up with a good book with soft music playing in the background.

If you find yourself without plans to ring in the new year, and staying at home doesn't appeal to you, generate other options. Surf the internet for singles activities in your area that are offered through local churches, synagogues and community groups.

Mt. Laurel psychologist, Dr. Kathy Milano, emphasizes that "during these seasons of light, it's important to nurture yourself by engaging in activities, rituals and relationships that are soothing and meaningful. Nourishing yourself allows for a reconnection with the natural beauty already existing within you. Expanding your light reinforces your sense of self-appreciation and attracts even more nourishing relationships and activities into your life."

So, if you find yourself flying solo during the holidays - spread your wings and SOAR! g

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