Keeping it simple over the holiday season

The festive season is here. Again, we will be provided with a host of options and choices as to how we will spend our time and likely, how we will spend our money. We need to understand and appreciate that in tough and in good times, it's the thought that counts and that people who care about us would prefer our affection and our time. We need to get back to the basics and the simple things.

David and Jan are one of the many Canadian couples who have been affected by changing economic conditions. Their combined earnings this year will be slightly less than their previous year's combined salaries. It's not surprising, then, that David and Jan are concerned about how they and their three teenagers will handle the holiday season on a more limited budget than last year.

Nicole, a nurse who has recently moved to Winnipeg from Vancouver, can't get enough time off work to travel home. She will be spending the holidays away from family and friends. Nicole is disappointed because she associates the festive season with warm family gatherings.

Peter and Ellen, on the other hand, find family gatherings a source of holiday woes. First, they drive two hours to Peter's parents' home in the country for brunch. Then, they get in the car and drive another two hours to Ellen's mother's home in the city for the holiday dinner. Peter and Ellen are not only tense from the driving and rushing around, but also because neither one of them really feels comfortable with each other's in-laws.

Although not everyone has to cope with these same situations, few people are exempt from facing the demands and stresses of the holiday season. Some will exclude themselves from the pleasures of the festive season by dwelling on the negative aspects of the holidays, rather than on the positive ones. Others will miss out because they overburden themselves with endless preparations for the holiday season. And still others will spoil the holidays for themselves by the all-too common trait of overindulgence—too much eating, drinking or spending.

In each of these circumstances, these men and women tend to overlook that they don't have to be overwhelmed by the holiday celebrations. They need to realize that it's possible to stop thinking about what can't be changed and work on the things that can.

For instance, David and Jan will certainly experience stress if they choose to dwell both on what others have and on what they themselves lack. Difficult as it may be, they can avoid these self-defeating attitudes by focusing on the many pleasant alternatives to spending money. They may even find that a less materialistic view of the holiday season is a more satisfying and meaningful one.

Nicole can stop thinking of the traditional holidays she has enjoyed in the past and try to view this festive season on her own as an adventure. This may mean throwing a small get-together for neighbours or co-workers or reaching out to those who are less fortunate than she is. Although family holiday rituals can be pleasant and help to reinforce the feelings that we are loved, it's important for Nicole to realize that there is no one "right" way to celebrate the holidays.

Whether they realize it or not, Peter and Ellen have allowed themselves to be controlled by other people's expectations. They do have a choice. Perhaps this is the year for them to establish their own tradition by celebrating their special day in their own home appreciating each other or perhaps entertaining a few very close friends whose company they find nourishing. Ellen and Peter can soften their parents' disappointment by arranging to visit at some specific alternative time.

Think about our other examples: those with a negative attitude toward the holidays; those who make the holidays tiring and difficult; those who overindulge. Did you realize that these people are increasing their stress levels? Unfortunately, many people are genuinely unaware that they are causing their own unhappiness

There are a number of things we can do to make ourselves happier during the upcoming holiday season. Here are some:

- **Be aware of your needs.** Most of us carry on pretty much as we always have during the holidays, regardless of what is going on in our lives. If you have been experiencing a lot of stress at work, for instance, this may be the holiday season for you and your family to take a vacation or simply to rest up at home.

- Perhaps your stress has been triggered by a divorce, a career disappointment or a health problem. **You may want to opt out of the usual "fun celebrations" and use the holidays as a time for reflection.** You may benefit from some form of spiritual nourishment, from reading a few meaningful books or even from visiting a fitness spa.

- **Realize that you don't have to do everything yourself.** If you're one of those long-suffering people who get very little enjoyment out of the holiday season because you're overburdened with the chores of the festival season, stop waiting for things to change. Take charge and delegate tasks to family members.

- Are you the one who prepares the holiday dinner for a large gathering of family and friends? **Maybe you could cook the turkey and ask the guests to bring the trimmings.** One person could bring the appetizers, another vegetable casseroles and others the dessert. You can avoid the bother of serving a hot dinner to a large crowd by setting up a buffet and letting the guests help themselves.

- **Limit your spending.** Here are two simple solutions to the problem of gift giving for the many families who are more budget conscious this holiday season:

    1. **Draw names.** This means that each person buys and receives one gift. In fact, the element of surprise—wondering who drew your name—can make gift giving more fun. It's important, however that everyone plays by the rules. If there is a limit to the cost of the gift, don't be tempted to show off by spending more money.

2. **Agree on spending limits for gifts.** Talk with those persons in your life to whom you give gifts and from whom you receive gifts, well in advance. Explain your point of view and you may well be pleasantly surprised that they express relief because they are feeling the same way. Those who want to give a more expensive gift can wait until another special occasion such as Valentine's day or the person's birthday.

- **Don't overindulge in food and drink.** The round of holiday parties can be especially difficult for those recovering from dependence on some substance. If overindulgence is your problem and you think the temptations might be too great, politely decline invitations to parties. But don't think this means you must miss out on the festivities. Throw your own small party and invite your favourite people. You can serve low-calorie foods that are nourishing and satisfying as well as non-alcoholic drinks.

- **Help others.** One of the best ways to celebrate the holiday season is to be charitable. Giving time, affection and care to others, especially those in need is the most rewarding experience of all. One couple whose small business had been adversely affected by the economic downturn last year found that working with other volunteers to serve a holiday dinner to the homeless took their minds off their own troubles. Some of us may know of at least one elderly person who would value a special friendly visit.

- **Many organizations rely on volunteer help at this time of year.** One such organization in Winnipeg, called "Christmas Cheer Board", is dedicated to collecting, sorting and distributing Christmas Hampers to those in need. You could call your City Hall or your Community Information Centre to find out about similar organizations in your area.

- **Recognize when holiday rituals become a burden, not a pleasure.** Perhaps some of your fondest memories are of decorating the tree when your children were small. Now that they are teenagers however, it's just a big hassle to get them to help. Realize that times have changed and that your family may no longer find this ritual meaningful. Put up a few decorations or lights, if you want, but forget about a tree—at least for this year. Who knows, you may find the tree trimming ritual welcomed back by popular demand next year.

- **Try to develop a positive attitude toward the holiday season.** All too often, we tend to focus on the negative aspects of the holidays—the commercialism, the holiday crush at shopping malls and the unending chores. This year make the effort to see the magic that is part of the holiday celebrations. Regardless of your religious background, you can enjoy the music, the lights and the decorations in the store windows.

- **Be realistic.** Think for a moment. Do you expect too much of the holidays? All of us have to learn to accept reality—life isn't perfect. And seldom are holiday celebrations like the glossy photographs we see in magazines this time of year. A focus on impossible expectations may be harmful in that it results in disappointment and unhappiness.

If we can't have a perfect holiday season, we can have many happy moments. Let these suggestions help you to create a very special gift for yourself—your best holiday season ever!