

Holiday Survival

Help for the Season

A survival guide offers facts and tips that help you foresee danger and survive in the wild. Likewise, this survival guide will help you anticipate and find the safest path through any emotional jungles you may find yourself in during the holiday season.

This book is meant to be your companion guide for the days ahead, so read the encouraging words, take notes, and complete the exercises to navigate the holidays with a measure of peace and assurance.



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Chapter 1

Dealing with Your Emotions

Everywhere you look this season, couples are laughing together at a restaurant, strolling down the sidewalk holding hands, or enjoying a cup of holiday cocoa with their kids. These sights can cause a wave of emotions to crash over you, as you consider what you've lost. What do you do with these emotions? Where do you find the strength to make it through?

In this chapter you'll find out:

- **Common emotional struggles**
- **How to prepare for emotional ambushes**
- **How to ask for and accept help**
- **Where strength can be found**

The Strength to Survive

Daily Readings

These short articles will help you know what to expect over the holidays and offer biblical encouragement and support.

Things Will Not Be the Same

Iwalked into Christmas thinking it would be the same as what I normally had—and it was so different,” shares Monica.

The changes in the holidays this year can cause unexpected and difficult feelings to surface. But acknowledging the fact that your holidays will look and feel different is the first step in preparing for them. Because when you’re expecting the differences, their emotional impact will be lessened.

“The best advice I can give to somebody who is entering the holiday season for the first time after a separation or divorce is to be prepared,” says Laura Petherbridge, divorce recovery author. “It’s the person who does not prepare who ends up in more emotional discomfort than the person who is already aware this is going to be a difficult time.”

Psychologist Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge offers this encouragement: “It may look right now like you don’t have any future and what’s there to really hope for, but having faith and trust that God will show the way and He’ll lead you through is helpful because it is the truth.”

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

God, please give me Your strength, peace, and joy as I navigate this new season. And please help me to trust in You as I move forward.

Takeaway:

Recognizing that the holidays will be different helps lessen the emotional impact.

Bible Verses to Help You Make It Through

Sometimes it can feel so hard to take steps forward through the broken pieces of a separation or divorce. But thankfully you're not alone in this. In God's Word (the Bible) you will find promises and encouragement that will strengthen and protect you.

We asked people where they found the help and courage to keep going:

In God's faithfulness: "I just held those words in Isaiah 41:10. When I was crying and sad, I was like, 'You will never leave me. You will never forsake me. You are always faithful, and I know You will not leave me alone.'" *Maria*

In God's forgiveness: "Even though I didn't want the separation or the divorce, I still had guilt. What did I do wrong? What could I have done? Acts 10:43 says, 'Everyone who believes in him [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins through his name.' I thought about that a lot during the holidays. I knew I had forgiveness." *Kathy*

In God's guidance: "Psalm 139 says that even the darkness was like light to God and that all the days in my life were ordained in God's book before even one of them came to be. I knew that even though this was dark to me, it wasn't dark to God. So if I could just hold on to God, He could lead me through what I needed to walk through." *Monica*

In God's presence: "Philippians 4:6 says, 'Be anxious about nothing, and in everything by prayer and petition, give it to the Lord.' And I do. It doesn't mean I don't have bad moments, but I can recover from them by going to the Bible, by picking up the phone with somebody I've met through church and those mentors I have in my life, and it passes. I know that's God, and I know He's there." *Jan*

In God's care: "Psalm 23 really helped me. I tried to pray that and read it again and again. And not just reading it, [but] trying to understand every word that God was telling me through that Psalm. I just held on to His promises." *Maria*

Takeaway:

You can find strength, hope, and encouragement in God's Word.

Survival Tips

The exercises in this section will help you apply the practical ideas in this book to your own life.

Avoid Being Blindsided

Emotional ambushes are triggered by activities, traditions, songs, sights, sounds, etc., that remind you of past times. Mentally preparing yourself will help lessen the ambush factor.

Retired pastor Dr. Robert DeVries suggests that before you attend a holiday event, replay in your mind the traditions that always involved your former spouse. For instance, if your ex always carved the turkey, baked those sugar cookies, or prepped the holiday playlist, think about who will do that this year.

Answer the following questions to help you prepare.

Holiday preparations: Your spouse likely had a certain role in decorating for the holidays, cooking/baking, gift-giving, etc. How will holiday preparations look different this year?

Holiday get-togethers: How has your divorce affected who you'll be getting together with this holiday season, compared to past holidays? (Will you miss seeing certain people; is there potential for awkwardness or discomfort; is there a possibility of conflict?)

Thanksgiving/Christmas Day: What will you miss most about your ex-spouse's presence on Thanksgiving/Christmas Day?

If you and your ex-spouse will be splitting the time with your children, how will that affect your holidays?

Holiday Journal

What to Do with Your Holiday Emotions

Journaling can help you slow down your thoughts and sort through the tangled emotions you're experiencing this Thanksgiving and Christmas season, providing some peace of mind.

Use a separate notebook or journal to write your responses to one (or more) of the topics below. This is for your eyes only, so don't worry about spelling, being neat, or guarding your words.

- Psalm 147:3 says that the Lord heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Tell Him in what ways your heart is broken this season, and ask Him to bind up your wounds.
- Read the comment below and share your personal thoughts about crying or showing emotions in public.

"Emotions are natural for all of us, and yes, other people may become uncomfortable with them. The Bible is filled with examples of people weeping in public. Crying is not shameful at all. A good show of emotion from time to time, even at a party, shows authenticity for the significant loss you've experienced in your life."
Dr. Robert DeVries, retired pastor

- Make a list of the emotions you've been dealing with recently. For each one, write down the memories, beliefs, or desires associated with this emotion. Regarding any desires you jot down, are there ways to satisfy them in a healthy way? (Breaking this up into multiple sittings can be helpful.)

Example:

Loneliness – Every night when I would crawl into bed, he'd kiss me and say, "I love you forever." I feel like loneliness is this black hole inside of me, and at night it sucks me in further. Will it always hurt this much?

I just need a break from the pain. God, You say You're always with me. I need comfort and I want to not feel so desperately lonely. Please help me.

Healthy ideas to not feel so lonely in bed at night:

- *Find a friend who will pray with me by phone or text on lonely evenings.*
- *Read a Psalm from the Bible every night before bed.*
- *Listen to uplifting Christian music and focus on the words.*
- *Read a Christian book on loneliness.*

Slow down the chaos

Your thoughts and emotions may be on overload this holiday season. A guided journal can help you sort your emotions and find joy.



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Chapter 2

Having a Plan

Planning gives you a degree of control over your emotions. And during times like these—when life has even more potential to feel out of control—deciding what you'll do and not do is wise.

This chapter discusses:

- **Whether or not to continue holiday traditions that become difficult or uncomfortable without your spouse**
- **Why having a plan is crucial**
- **How to create a straightforward yet flexible plan**
- **How to take care of yourself and your children this season**

Survivor Stories

Lesia and Maria realized that planning ahead would help minimize holiday stress and potential hurts.



“Because I knew it was going to be just me this Christmas, I started shopping back in August. I had it all done before Thanksgiving. I knew I had to plan because my finances were different.” – *Lesia*



“I have become more intentional about making plans for the holidays so that I’m not alone. I have friends in my church, and I know they will [welcome] me to their places. I’ll be happy to be with church people or other friends.”
– *Maria*

The Strength to Survive

Daily Readings

Find ways to reduce stress and create a meaningful, doable, flexible plan suited to you.

The Importance of Having a Plan

Winging it is a poor choice if you're dealing with the holidays. Often it comes from, *I don't want to think about it; I don't want to deal with it.* But not thinking about it doesn't mean the holidays are going to disappear," says Dr. Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge, psychologist.

Keeps you from being overwhelmed

As you approach the holidays, you will be faced with events, traditions, expectations, and responsibilities. Having a plan helps lessen the chance of becoming overwhelmed, and it enables you to prioritize the things most important to you.

What does this look like?

- *Planning* simply means you decide what and how much you want to do.
- *Prioritizing* means that if there are 15 different activities, pick which one or two are most important to you.

Gives you time to breathe

Making a plan is part of self-care. "Avoid jamming your calendar full of things to do," says author Elsa Kok Colopy, speaking from her own experience. "You're going to find your energy level is lower. You're processing grief; you [may be] managing your kids' emotions. You'll almost go on autopilot like, 'I've got to do this, this, and this because it's what I do every year.' Give yourself the time and space to process your emotions and to breathe."

Creates flexibility without stress

Whatever you plan or prioritize, allow yourself flexibility to adjust it. You might plan to go to a special event, but when time comes, you don't feel up to it. That's okay! Just continue forward with the next planned event.

While the thought of making a plan can seem daunting, you don't have to plan and prioritize alone. Use the charts and tips in this book to guide you. Ask a family member or friend to help you make your plan. If you have kids, invite

their input; the holidays may be more predictable and comforting to them if they are part of the planning. Be sure to invite God into the process.

“Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans.”

(Isaiah 41:10)

God, please help me to create a plan during the holidays and stay flexible. And help me feel Your presence as I navigate this new season.

Takeaway:

Having a plan helps keep you from becoming overwhelmed.

Laying the Foundation for Your Plan

As you make decisions about what activities to participate in, who to spend time with, and how to handle unexpected emotions, you'll want to lay the right foundation for your plans. Dr. Paul David Tripp, counselor, offers three tips:

1. Know yourself. Know your strengths and weaknesses. Make plans that focus on your strengths, and be cautious about those that bring out your weaknesses. For instance, if spending time with your nieces and nephews brings you joy, plan a visit. If at the office party you might be tempted to numb yourself with alcohol or connect with someone who finds you desirable—don't go.

Put things on the calendar that will refresh your spirit: Lunch with a friend? A hike alone with God? A special church concert or holiday play?

2. Consider who's best for you. You have a good idea of how family and friends will respond to you—and the type of advice or support they'll give. Plan to spend time with people who will lift you up and encourage you in your faith. Plan to avoid those who will fan the flame of negativity toward your ex or pressure you to lower your moral standards.

3. Commit to reading and studying your Bible to learn more about who God is and what He promises. As you dive into His Word, you'll find peace and reassurance for life's uncertainties. For example, when you read the verses below, how do they help ease any worries you have as you anticipate and plan for the coming holidays?

"For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones." (Isaiah 49:13b)

"Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17)

"For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." (Psalm 100:5)

God, You know me better than anyone, and You have promised to be with me in all situations. Help me to be prepared for the days ahead.

Takeaway:

You can feel secure when your plan starts on solid footing.

Simplifying Your Plans

You can't do it all this holiday season. Whatever you think you must do, consider how you could simplify the things that seem overwhelming or that may be a financial burden. The key is to look for a balance between meaningful and manageable.

To simplify this year,* you could:

Be selective about decorating: Instead of putting up every decoration, consider which are most important to you (and fit your current energy level). If you choose to have a tree, you could skip hanging your typical ornaments and decorate the tree with small stuffed animals, mementos, or items from nature. Or consider a tabletop tree or a centerpiece that focuses on the true meaning of Christmas.

Realize you don't need to purchase a gift for everyone: If finances are tight, consider a personal message in a card; a gift of a meal, dessert, or time; or a bag filled with that person's favorite snacks. Be up-front with family and friends about changes in gift-giving.

Consider holiday meal shortcuts: You could have each guest bring a dish to share, order in, go out, have make-your-own turkey sandwiches, or ask someone else to plan this year's meal.

Be sure to call on God for help this season!

"Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I." (Isaiah 58:9a)

Lord, give me the courage to speak up and let others know I will be celebrating more simply this year and that I'd appreciate their support and understanding.

Takeaway:

Focus on making plans that are simple, yet meaningful.

*See pages 39–43 for help putting your plan on paper.

