

## the hardest month

Sometimes circumstances conspire to make the holidays a time of tension rather than joy. A few ideas for coping in three common situations:

**It's your first holiday after a divorce or with an empty nest.** In the past, you probably spent your time catering to others. "Now you've got the freedom to do something entirely different but still special," says Tina B. Tessina, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in Long Beach, California. Consider getting away for some rest and relaxation. Or choose an activity that reflects the true meaning of the holidays: Volunteer to cook food at a shelter or make party decorations at a hospital.

**You don't get along with your family.** Try limiting face-time—for example, show up just for dinner instead of spending the entire day with relatives. If that's not possible, focus on the positive, such as talking to the one person you really enjoy. Or offer to help the kids with a jigsaw puzzle or take the dog for a walk. "You'll get thanks for helping out, and also remove yourself from the center of the tension," says Dr. Tessina.

**The anniversary of a loved one's death falls during the holidays.** Pay tribute to your loss: Visit the grave site or



The holidays can be tough if you're dealing with a loss.

light candles for the deceased. "It's important to say 'I love you' and 'I miss you.' You'll feel better and your grief won't seep into the entire season," says Dr. Tessina. If you're feeling lonely, invite a friend to lunch, or go to a lecture or church event. "Don't spend the day hiding out," she urges.

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