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Un(der)employed...’tis the season to be jolly, or not?

by

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Bright and colorful lights adorning stores and homes, cheery music blasting in shopping malls, smiley faces and greetings, and noisy parties...each quickly becoming part of our personal landscape as the holiday season quickly approaches...all reminders of what is intended to be a season of joy. While the world around us appears to become carried away by the momentum of the upcoming holidays, the symbols and energy of this season stand in stark contrast to the pain and pressures encountered by those without work or whose jobs have been drastically cut back. Throughout Massachusetts thousands of workers have been impacted by the loss of a job and/or income as public and private organizations seek to be viable in an uncertain economy. Their feelings from this loss are a weight often carried into the impending holiday period, and are markedly different from the public mood of the season ahead. For example, these individuals often experience discomfort, sometimes embarrassment, over what to say about their job status at seasonal gatherings of friends and family. At a time when gift-giving and flashy, ongoing sales of gift items are a focus of the world around, individuals without a steady and substantial paycheck are often worried about maintaining mortgage or rent payments.

From my many conversations with individuals who are unemployed or underemployed (and from my own personal experience of being without a job for many months including the holidays), I have learned that this season, though potentially challenging, can be survived with a degree of thoughtful planning. Some suggestions for getting through it follow:

1. Make this a season for communication. Be sure that you are talking about your feelings and concerns with those important to you, whether partners, family members, close friends, or yes, even your children if told in language they can understand and which doesn't make them feel overwhelmed. The holiday season is a time for sharing and giving to others, and your personal thoughts and feelings, though perhaps awkward to talk about, are a part of this exchange between people. Take advantage of the spirit of giving and community that comes with the holidays!

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Un(der)employed... 'tis the season to be jolly, or not? (cont'd)...2

2. Have a message for others. Be prepared for questions from party-goers and family members at social gatherings. These individuals, out of concern or curiosity, may want to know about the status of your job search, your survival efforts, etc. Develop a standard response which is positive, but does not reveal more than is comfortable for you to communicate. Sometimes a simple statement such as “I am out there looking at all possibilities and managing finances the best way I know how”, perhaps repeated several times to a persistent questioner, is all that is needed to divert attention from a sensitive topic. Likewise, having a prepared message to respond to invitations from hosts of gatherings that you do not plan to attend will help reduce awkward encounters. It is okay, for example, to say that this is the time you’d like to spend by yourself or with family, or that you are involved with a project.

3. Plan activities within your limits. It’s amazing what fun things can be done individually, or with friends and family, while spending little money...sing-alongs, tree decorating, making of menorahs, movie festivals in the home, small group games, and baking to name just a few. Events at libraries and community centers are often fun and free. Involve friends and family in planning for these activities when possible. Activities that bring you closer to friends and family truly capture the spirit of what the season is meant to be. In a period of the year when advertising and gift purchasing reach their peak, evaluate what are realistic purchases for your budget. Often, making agreements with those important to you on limits with gift giving helps ease some of the awkwardness around this process. Children especially need to know in a way they can understand that as a family there will be a different and special kind of fun during this holiday season. Sometimes the most memorable gifts are the simplest ones, or those that are personally made, for example, a music tape, a poem, a drawing or photograph, and a food treat to name just a few. Some people have even given of their time, e.g., coverage for children of friends or family, assistance on projects, preparation of a meal, etc., as a gift for the season.

4. Do what feels right for you and those important to you. Being unemployed, or having a markedly reduced income, has enough pressures, so don’t add the burden of what you’re “supposed to do” during the season. If not at ease in larger gatherings, perhaps seeking time with individuals or smaller groups with whom you’re closest is the better option. You should not feel an obligation to participate in a social event unless you are ready to do so. On the other hand being at larger gatherings may be a good diversion from your preoccupation with your concerns. It may also serve as an excellent source of networking for job openings. Shorter visits to parties may make these events more manageable if you would like to attend. Parents of children may need to recognize that they require periods of time by themselves without their children present during this season. Activities focused around giving to others in need, such as

Un(der)employed... 'tis the season to be jolly, or not? (cont'd)...4

For individuals and families confronted with unemployment or underemployment, the holidays present a real challenge. The stories of the uncertain status in many organizations do not offer the hope that this challenge will lessen in the immediate future. The outward messages of the season are ones of joy and cheeriness. The expectation of acting in accordance with these can deepen the feelings already created by not having a job or adequate income. Yet, the true purpose of the holiday period is to become closer with those important to you, to give to others, and to reflect on one's own self with the passage of another year; money is not needed to obtain these ends. There is a choice to be made as to whether to engage in activities that can lead to further doubt and despair, or to be proactive in finding meaning and joy by doing things that feel good for you and by being with the people that mean the most to you. Deciding what works best for you, and avoiding the pressures that come from what you feel are the expectations of the holiday, can help this period be a richer and more meaningful time, and a time of hope for the new year beyond the season.

Versions of this article have appeared in several Boston-area newspapers including the Taunton Daily Gazette, the Metrowest Daily News, the Newton TAB, and the Allston-Brighton TAB. Phone numbers listed as resources were current at the time of the publication of these articles. For current phone information you can go to www.counselingatacrossroads.com or use other available search resources.