

StepMom

M a g a z i n e

NOVEMBER 2010

CONQUERING the BIGGEST HOLIDAY STEPHASSLES

The 4 Lies We Tell Stepmoms

She's Giving Thanks for Her Stepmom

One Woman's Beautiful Story

Encountering Exes During the Holidays!

How to Handle it Gracefully

GIRLFRIENDS

Why YOU Need Them!

THANKSGIVING CRAFTS

Your Stepkids will LOVE

STYLISH STEPMOM shares her
HOLIDAY MONEY-SAVING TIPS



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Brenda's Corner

StepMom
Magazine

Stepmoms are often told they should manage or lower their expectations to avoid certain disappointment. I've always had a problem with this concept. In my mind, I equated lowering my expectations with settling for something less. Accepting mediocrity. Giving up, in a sense.

During this time of the year, you will read a lot of articles that address stepholidays and all that comes with them. Writers will advise you to anticipate unexpected schedule changes, prepare for inevitable encounters with exes and to know in advance that most family gatherings never live up to the perfect scenes depicted in those Norman Rockwell paintings. Their articles will almost always tell you to manage your expectations around the holidays. But what does that really *mean*?

It took me a few years to fully understand that lowering or managing my expectations is not settling or giving up. In fact, once I embraced the concept, I became happier and more relaxed. Now, it feels like a gift I give myself.

When you manage your own expectations, you actually allow others to be who they are without trying to control them. You "live and let live," which is a very mature way of behaving. By managing your expectations, you relieve yourself of the "responsibility" of creating perfect environments. You swim with the tide instead of against it, which gives you more energy to enjoy life. When you let go of your hardened expectations, you open yourself up to other ways of experiencing the world and allow yourself to be pleasantly surprised sometimes.

Managing your expectations is simply being realistic and accepting that plans will change, things might not be perfect and people will do things you don't like or agree with—all while you allow yourself to be happy in spite of it all. Isn't that the ultimate in control and self-care?

Give yourself the gift of a wonderful holiday season. You deserve it!

Brenda Ockun
Publisher and Founder



Gratitude and the Season of Giving



*She's thankful for her stepmom.
One woman's beautiful story...*

By Emily Bouchard
Founder: www.blended-families.com

Being a stepmom can often feel like the most thankless job on the planet. We're the easiest target, and we often have little to no say in decisions that have a direct impact on our lives.

As we enter into November and anticipate Thanksgiving and other upcoming holidays, as well as all of the emotional baggage that comes along with them—especially where blended families are concerned—stepmoms certainly can feel anything but thankful.

When clients contact me around this time of year, I recommend they find specific things in their lives for which they can genuinely feel grateful. Practicing gratitude can be an immediate way to shift a mood from discouragement and resignation into one of hope and possibility.

My stepmother has been my No. 1 inspiration in this department. She entered my life when I was one lost, unhappy and withdrawn 15-year-old whose mother had suddenly died the previous year. With three kids and a job that required 60 or more hours of his attention each week, my father needed someone to be there for his kids, as well as himself. A trusted friend and colleague became our family's savior, and while she gained a husband and instant family she also had to deal with all of the emotional fallout of our painful loss.

She steadfastly stood by as we struggled through our teens. Her unwavering presence and belief in all of us

Know that your spirit, presence and ability to be positive and appreciative in the face of all that stepkids can dish out will have a lasting, beautiful and priceless impact on them as they grow up and one day become parents (and possibly stepparents) themselves.

contributed to us all becoming successful in our careers and in our family lives. As I became a stepmom myself to two teenagers, I often drew upon her wisdom and enduring positive attitude.

In 2002, a chronic illness she'd been battling since her early 30s became exacerbated and forced her to stop practicing as a physician. She also had to stop photography, her passion, and was unable to travel. To this day, she deals daily with a regimen of pills, treatments and procedures that would drive me insane. She wakes up each day in pain and with very little energy or ability to move. Instead of complaining or giving up and staying in bed, she wakes herself up and dresses herself, coiffing her wig just so and applying her makeup just right, even with a drooping eyelid, swollen legs and labored breathing.

I am amazed at her ongoing ability to look on the bright side. I'm in disbelief as she tells me about how a nail on her thumb got a fungal infection when she was in the hospital and how her manicurist is helping her get her nails healthy again. She shows me how the infection is almost all gone and says, "It could have been worse. I still have the use of my finger." This is her attitude about everything. She loves quoting Gilda Radner from "Saturday Night Live." "If it's not one thing, it's another," she says, and then we all laugh together.

She has this gratefulness about life and about all that she can do, even while facing daily setbacks and challenges as her body continues to lose functions. She put down her camera and took up knitting. She took off her stethoscope and took up a laptop and is now writing essays for a blog and articles that have been published in "Psychiatry Today." She shared with me how her articles are being used to train psychiatry residents on the perspective of the patient from one who understands both the medical model and diagnoses, as well as what it means to be the patient. Even as her illness robs her of her ability to engage in the world as she used to, she continues to teach and touch the hearts and minds of others.

I'm glad I shifted from an insolent teenager to a stepdaughter who can be truly grateful for the relationship and love I have with my "bonus" mother who is one of the most inspiring women I've ever known. I don't know how I got to be so fortunate to have two amazing mothers in my life.

I also am grateful for the chance to share the power of this gratitude with other stepmothers who may not know how much of an impact they are having on their stepchildren. Know that your spirit, presence and ability to be positive and appreciative in the face of all that stepkids can dish out will have a lasting, beautiful and priceless impact on them as they grow up and one day become parents (and possibly stepparents) themselves.

Keep up what I know can sometimes feel like the thankless task at hand and know that you truly are step heroes for how you show up each day for your stepchildren.



Emily Bouchard founded www.blended-families.com to provide tools to dramatically improve relationships in blended families. A leading expert in the field, Emily has been featured on numerous TV and Radio shows including The Today Show and NPR, and has been quoted in print around the world, in publications such as Newsweek and The New York Times.

FOUR BIG LIES WE TELL WOMEN WITH STEPCHILDREN



IGNORING BAD ADVICE CAN SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE AND YOUR SANITY!

An excerpt from "Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do"

By Wednesday Martin, Ph.D.

Books for stepmothers tend to perpetuate certain myths. The myth of the blended family and the myth of the maternal stepmother are the most glaring examples. These books' relentlessly upbeat tone can make stepmothers feel as though our own occasional negativity and impatience regarding his kids are freakish. Other books on stepmothering are so lighthearted, so insistent that we see the humor in our situation and in our responses to it, that reading them feels suspiciously like being told that our concerns don't matter and that we just need to lighten up. But the real problem with many books for stepmothers is not what they imply, but what they actually say:

- ◆ ***Remember that his kids will always come first.***
- ◆ ***Leave the disciplining to him.***
- ◆ ***You will regret it forever if you lose your temper or say something nasty to your stepchildren, so whatever you do, don't.***
- ◆ ***With patience and love, they will come around.***

The fact that these directives have become a virtual mantra, the unassailable golden rules of stepmothering does not mean that they are right. For example, a number of stepfamily experts concur that in a remarriage with

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children, giving the couple relationship priority is crucial. It may jar us to learn that our concept that "the kids are the most important thing" is misguided, even destructive to our partnerships. The ideas that you should be second and should accept it, that his kids came first chronologically and so are first in his heart, and that his believing and acting on these ideas makes him a good person are powerful, deeply ingrained beliefs. But all of them can be fatal for the remarriage with children. They are even bad for the children, giving them an uncomfortable amount of power and focusing an undue amount of attention and pressure on them.

Andrew Gotzis, M.D., a New York City psychiatrist and therapist who works with couples, echoed the advice of a number of marriage counselors when he told me, "In a remarriage with children, the hierarchy of the family needs to be established quickly and clearly. The kids need to know that the husband and wife come first and that they are a unified team." Otherwise, Dr. Gotzis cautioned, the kids can split the couple apart and create tension in the marriage indefinitely. To remarried couples with children, the scenario of kids turning to Dad when Stepmom has said no, or vice versa, in an attempt to split the team is all too familiar. A woman with stepchildren may exhaust herself with her attempts to resolve such situations. For this reason, sociologist Linda Nielsen notes that a woman with stepchildren will have more success when she adopts the attitude "My main goal and my main focus is to build an intimate, fulfilling relationship with my husband and to take better care of my own needs, not to bond with or win the approval of my stepchildren." Nielsen notes that a shift like this cannot happen in a vacuum; the woman's partner needs to be on the same page with her. If the marriage is to work, Nielsen insists, "her husband has to be committed to creating a [partnership] around which his children revolve rather than a marriage that revolves around his children. Especially when his children dislike their stepmother, the father has to make it clear that the kids will not be handed the power or given the precedence over his marriage."

"Things didn't improve until I let my daughter know that, even though I loved her, my ultimate loyalty was to my wife," one man who had survived a rocky early remarriage with children observed. We can only imagine the resultant fireworks in that household. But the outcome was a stronger marriage. This in turn gave his daughter proof that marriages can last. It also replaced what could have become profound confusion about her unchecked power in the family with a sense of secure belonging.

As for the advice "Leave the disciplining to him," whoever said it never went to a home while the stepkids were visiting and their father was out. Certainly, no one is saying to step right in and start issuing orders to your stepkids in your first days and weeks together -- and few of us are likely to do that, fearing that we will be perceived as wicked. But what works in theory -- you should hold back more or less indefinitely so that you don't seem like the villain, backing up your husband rather than doing things yourself -- doesn't always work in practice. What happens when a stepchild does something that crosses the line but hubby isn't around? Are you to sit on your hands and bite your tongue rather than issue a firm "That's not okay, and you know it"? Moreover, firsthand experience has often demonstrated that the longer a woman with stepchildren waits, the harder it is for her ever to draw the line or be taken seriously as an adult with authority. I can attest to this fact. Because I was more or less a fraidy cat in the first year of my marriage, I had to be a tiger for the subsequent two or three years, as my stepdaughters still occasionally tried to walk all over me, just to see if they could. This was hardly their fault; I waited ages to take a stand about things such as snide remarks, dumping suitcases in the middle of the floor, and ignoring me.

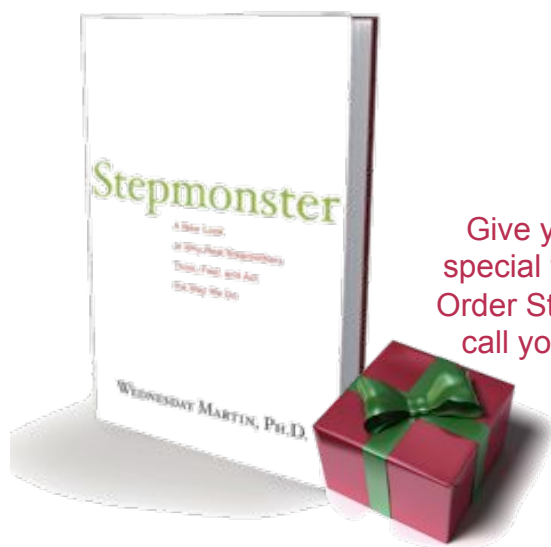
Sometimes it *is* easier and smarter to ignore a stepchild's annoying habit, to decline to get involved in an emotion-charged discussion over her sweet sixteen party, or to be the voice of reason when planning her wedding. A number of women with stepchildren have found that "disengaging" is, in some situations, far and away the best strategy for them (see chapter 4). Other times, ignoring bad behavior just feels like being stepped on and creates a breeding ground for more resentment. And then what?

The culture at large is eager to gloss over women's anger in general, and advice for stepmothers in particular is full of warnings that if we express it, the consequences will be dire and irreversible. This strikes me as absurd. It would be the rare stepchild who never went through a phase of wanting to provoke his or her stepmom. Of course we lose our tempers, inevitably. And although it can feel catastrophic -- What if they hate me? What if they think I'm wicked? -- expressing our anger is, in my opinion, something we should do sooner rather than later. Otherwise, we risk setting the bar too impossibly high for everyone and creating a situation in which kids, teens, or even adult

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stepchildren go on pushing our buttons forever in an attempt to see where our limit is. Most of all, we need to learn as soon as possible -- to experience firsthand -- that being disliked is an occupational hazard for stepmothers, not a referendum on our worth. "Dad's girlfriend Laura yelled at us once in the car," my stepdaughter told me solemnly in our early days together. I didn't know exactly why she was telling me this, but I knew how Laura must have felt, and I admired her for letting the girls know when she thought they'd gone too far.

You're not my mother! Most of us fear that it is yelling or disciplining or losing our tempers or not being nice enough or patient enough or selfless enough that will keep our husbands' children from accepting us or drive them away. If only we had so much control. Instead, unrealistic expectations about blending and being maternal, difficult developmental stages, competition that is largely inevitable and unavoidable, misinformation about stepmothering, and a host of other factors play a bigger role in the way a reconfigured family group coheres -- or doesn't. We are not, in fact, their mothers. Happily ever after and happiness all around are ideals -- unlikely ones at that, even in traditional nuclear families. Eventually, we may find that we have arrived at a place of comfort, familiarity, and real pleasure with our husbands' kids. But if our happiness is contingent on his kids being happy for us, being happy with us, and loving us, then we have given away our greatest power and put everything at risk.



Give yourself something special this holiday season. Order *Stepmonster* online or call your local bookstore.

The above is an excerpt from the book *Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do* by Wednesday Martin, Ph.D.. The above excerpt is a digitally scanned reproduction of text from print. Although this excerpt has been proofread, occasional errors may appear due to the scanning process. Please refer to the finished book for accuracy. Copyright © 2009 Wednesday Martin, Ph.D., author of *Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do*



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Calling All Stepmoms!

As a stepmom, you have a unique set of stresses and problems most women will never deal with – especially around the holidays. These can leave you feeling burned out, lonely and faltering under the weight of so many different expectations.

But no more!

Join stepmom Laura Petherbridge and stepfamily expert and president of Successful Stepfamilies Ron Deal, coauthors of *The Smart Stepmom*, as they offer fresh insights and practical solutions to problems specific to you – a stepmom.

In this 90-minute webinar they will show you how to:

- **Overcome the Christmas and holiday stressors unique to stepmoms**
- **Recognize the common causes of isolation and loneliness for stepmoms**
- **Embrace realistic expectations and dreams for stepfamily living**
- **And more!**

Don't miss this exciting opportunity!

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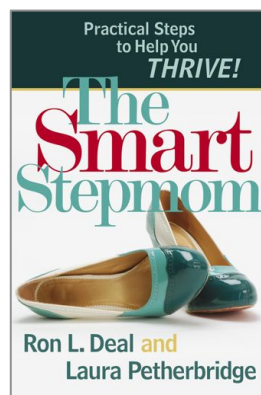
When: Tuesday, December 7, 8:00pm ET

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How Much: Only \$9.95

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www.successfulstepfamilies.com



Conquering Holiday Hassles



By Laura Petherbridge
Co-author: "The Smart Stepmom"

When I was a child, Christmas Eve was an elaborate event in my dad's Italian family. For that special night, my Nana prepared an exceptional menu of meats, fish, pastas and pastries that would make angels salivate. My cousins, aunts and uncles, godparents and various other people filled the house with boisterous talking, bellowing laughter, and an occasional argument. Nana's girlfriends spoke only Italian, and they smelled a little odd. But their pinch to your cheek, or bone-crunching hug, only added to the fun.

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Think “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” and you will get the picture. I cry every time I watch that movie. It brings back wonderful memories of the holidays at Nana’s and causes me to recall a time when I belonged to something bigger than myself. I felt loved and secure.

Now Nana is gone, the house is sold and the family is scattered. My quest to find meatballs like hers has proved fruitless, and I’ll never again walk into her familiar kitchen that affectionately whispered, “Welcome Home.” The sights, sounds and smells of the holidays have a way of triggering all sorts of memories and emotions, don’t they?

After 25 years as a stepmom, I recall a number of tense holiday seasons when I wanted to walk out to the nativity scene in my front yard and ask Baby Jesus to move over. I’d whisper, “This is not the life I bargained for. I don’t care if it’s freezing outside, the manger gives me splinters, or the hay makes me sneeze—at least it’s calm, quiet and safe.”

The holidays can be stressful because they represent a symbol of family belonging. And there’s the rub for a stepmom. When she feels “outside” of the family circle, the occasion can throw gasoline on an existing flame: the event can magnify her loneliness and discomfort.

But there are ways to overcome. Here are a few insights to help with stepfamily holiday hassles.

Stepfamilies Are Unique

Stepmom Sherrie explains the situation to her sister. “Julie, if you think the holidays are hectic at your house, try coordinating schedules, decorating, shopping, school programs, dinner and gift giving with the parents of three households. Add to the mix that most of the adults involved don’t even like each other and you have a taste of what Christmas is like in a stepfamily. Everything is more complicated because there are so many people who influence the plans, including the biological mom, her parents and siblings, and her husband’s family.”

The multiple-home, multiple-parent, multiple grandparent and in-law complexities of a stepfamily often rise to the surface during special occasions. The collision of various traditions, preferences and cultural norms can produce an interesting dynamic. In addition, it seems that holidays and special occasions bring out the best and the worst in people.

Stepmom is in the Hot Seat

Guess which family member typically feels the brunt of the holiday strain? The stepmom does. That’s because the calendar and planning of family celebrations often falls on her. A stepmom may feel overwhelmed and shocked by the flurry of activity and the sudden responsibility to coordinate everything.

Custody Conflict

Typically the greatest holiday discord comes when the two homes cannot agree on a reasonable visitation schedule. When the biological parents and/or stepparents refuse to work together to determine what is best for the kids, tension arises. It’s not uncommon for one parent to view “winning Christmas morning” as a victory in the divorce battle. But as stepmom Jennifer shares, there isn’t much to celebrate. “The bio mom and I try hard to work toward a reasonable solution and we’re as flexible as possible. But this rarely works because my husband is not willing to give up control and refrain from demanding his way. Then, the situation turns back to yelling and screaming and everyone suffers.”

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“If the family were a fruit, it would be an orange,
a circle of sections, held together but separable
- each segment distinct.”

– Letty Cottin Pogrebin

“Holiday gift suggestions: To your enemy, forgiveness.
To an opponent, tolerance. To a friend, your heart.
To a customer, service. To all, charity.
To every child, a good example. To yourself, respect.”

– Oren Arnold

Topsy-Turvy Traditions

Traditions play a huge role in the holiday dynamic. When family rituals and customs are sustained, they reinforce identity and define what is “normal.” I’d love to pass onto my stepsons the Italian family traditions I’ve experienced. But I quickly learned that they already have their own traditions, based on family background. What feels cozy and familiar to me isn’t “normal” for them. This lack of shared tradition makes each side feel different, disconnected and separate, thereby generating discomfort and stress for everyone.

Toxic Circumstances

When several family members who are unsettled about the stepfamily are gathered together for a special occasion, the cumulative anxiety may create an explosion. The underlying raw emotions that each person carries may be inflamed by others in the room. Therefore, take caution before throwing numerous family members into close surroundings if you suspect they are incapable of handling the tension. It’s best to celebrate separately until these issues can be resolved. Trying to resolve family conflict during special occasions is usually unproductive.

Plan Ahead

One of the main stressors for kids of divorce is not knowing which house will be “home for the holidays.” Make a plan as soon as possible. However, hold onto the reality that you cannot control the parents. If, at the last minute, one of them decides to withhold the kids as a weapon to hurt each other—even if the divorce papers dictate differently—you can’t fix it. Step back and let your spouse deal with the situation, which may mean going to court.

Bridging the Gap is the Goal

Slowly implementing new traditions, while holding onto old ones, is a good way to start. Stepmoms often want everything to be new and different than the first marriage or the first wife, but it’s unwise to throw out everything that’s familiar.

Sit down as a family and discuss what the kids enjoy and what they would like to do this year. Learn what traditions are significant to them and which ones they can toss. Then, try one new small thing. “I know you have always had an artificial tree in the past. Would you like to get a real one this year?”

During the holidays, your family may not look like a Norman Rockwell painting, but neither does mine. To have a happier holiday, I’ve learned to lower my expectations, treat the family with love and compassion, work on the things I can control and let go of the ones I cannot, surround myself with people I enjoy and remember the reason for the season.

Ahhh. Now, where is that cup of eggnog?



Laura Petherbridge is an international author and speaker who serves couples and single adults with topics on stepfamilies, relationships, divorce prevention, and divorce recovery. She is the author of *When “I Do” Becomes “I Don’t”—Practical Steps for Healing During Separation and Divorce*, and *The Smart Stepmom*, co-authored with Ron Deal. She is a featured expert on the DivorceCare DVD series. Her website is www.TheSmartStepmom.com



Saving Money During the Holidays

The holidays are right around the corner, and the economy is still sluggish. So, what can you do to save money as we head into this holiday season?

Consignment Shopping

Consignment shopping has been around for years. But with the economy taking a turn for the worse, it has breathed new life into an old way of saving money. Consignment shopping is good on the pocketbook no matter how you look at it. You can save money when purchasing some great finds and you can *make* money by selling items that might be hanging around in your closet. The biggest tip I can give you when it comes to consignment shopping is take your time! Typically, these stores have a lot of product. So, plan on being in the store awhile. They are great at organizing by color, size or product, but you will need time. Believe me, it is worth it. I was in a consignment store the other day and found a brand-new high-end designer item still with the tags on it. Originally priced at \$425, I got it for \$42.50. Yep. Consignment can be worth the time *and* save you money!

Fashion Swapping

This has become a bigger crazy because of the economy, too, and can be a great way to have an evening out with the girls and walk away with some new items for your wardrobe. Determine who and what the swap is for—men, women, children, accessories, etc. Pick a night and a location. Each of you brings a certain amount of items to exchange, and you get to pick out a certain amount of items. It's a fun and inexpensive way to shop without spending anything except some time with friends and a few laughs.

Online Discount Websites

Another resource for saving money is online shopping. Numerous websites are popping up all dedicated to saving you money. It's another great resource to find some popular items at discounted prices. Now, some of the websites are by "invite only," but typically you are accepted right away or it doesn't take long to be accepted. Here are a few of my favorites:

www.gilt.com
www.hautelook.com
www.ideeli.com
www.shopittome.com
www.beyondtherack.com
www.ruelala.com
www.overstock.com



Let them know that Stylish Stepmom sent you! I hope you enjoy these great ways to save money and enjoy the upcoming holidays!



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By Susan Davis Swanson, MSW, LCSW

November is that wonderful month that starts off the holiday season. For many of us, it will bring with it warm feelings and memories of holidays and of being with family and friends. For others it's a time of tremendous stress. There may be some of you who will be frustrated that you can't celebrate the holiday this year the way you may want to. Some of you may feel displaced that you're in a stepfamily and it's not feeling like your family. Maybe the family isn't feeling the way you had visualized and hoped it would. Many of us though, on Thanksgiving Day, will stop and give thanks for what we do have in our lives. But what would happen if each day this month we put our attention on what we are thankful for? Would it change our attitude? The way we think and feel? Would it alter our perspective? Would we feel happier?

As a therapist, I am continually fascinated by the way we, as humans, think. Animals just shake off events and live in the moment. People, however, are able to think and remember, which means we can ruminate and carry around resentments, hurts, disappointments and frustrations. We can keep track, keep score and, over time, let these feelings of resentment and unhappiness continue to build. We can even justify them and build our case!

Mindfulness is about becoming aware of our thoughts so we can catch them, watch them and have the power to change them. Take a minute right now to become mindful. Notice how often you may be walking around, complaining to others or even silently to yourself about all the things that are wrong. You know those silent miffs, the dialogue that goes on in your mind like, "Will he ever clean the kitchen the way I want him to? He never puts the dishes away right," or "How many times do those kids have to leave something in the living room?" Then, we get stressed or irritated, take out our frustration with our girlfriends or on those annoying cars in traffic and get to work more stressed and upset.

If we start our day in that state of mind, which we can do daily, it just builds until we can find ourselves burned out, frustrated or completely discouraged. While we all have days like this, when you pay attention to how you are thinking you might notice how often you actually are thinking negatively.

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So, what if you became mindful and began to change the way you think? Albert Einstein said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Is that the same with emotions? While we can always see what the other person is doing wrong and how much happier we would be if they changed, can some of it be attributed to our attitude?

When I first heard of Oprah's gratitude journal, I didn't quite understand its value. She has been suggesting this to her listeners for years and years. I don't think I was ready to consider how it would change my thinking because I was attached to the way I thought, quite frankly. But at some point I realized that I might be contributing to my own unhappiness, so I began to wonder if maybe she was onto something and if some of my own problems were a result of the way I was thinking.

Paying attention, I began each day focusing on things for which I was grateful. It actually began to change the way I viewed my world. It kept me focused on the positive rather than the negative (the half of the glass that is full). It altered my mood and my outlook. I noticed it was easy to be grateful when my husband and kids were all doing the right things. But the days that were the hardest and the most challenging became the most important days to refocus my attention on what was, in fact, good in my life because those were the days it was needed the most.

We can all become buried in life's frustrations, aggravations and problems. Stepfamily life offers us plenty of those. This will erode our happiness because then, the very man with whom we fell head over heels in love disappears before our very eyes when we focus on his flaws (by the way, those of you who are flawless, raise your hands)! When we focus on those flaws, on what isn't right, on how someone is failing us or on how angry or hurt we are, we will struggle harder to see the good in our life. That half-empty glass will begin to feel emptier and emptier, and we will become angrier, more depressed and dissatisfied with our lives.

Take a good look at your partner today. What are you grateful for in him? Maybe you can see how he truly loves and cares about you. Maybe you can be grateful for the way he is affectionate or understands you in a way no one else ever has. Maybe you can be grateful that he's a good man in the world and someone you can respect. Maybe you can consider that even though he doesn't do things the way you wish he would, the things he does and the way he is comes from a place of love and care. How many times in stepfamily life do we fall in love with the guy who we see is a good, caring and loving dad only to become angry and upset with him later over that very thing?

Gratitude can be about all kinds of things. Today, I woke up grateful that the weather was wonderful and fall was in the air, grateful that I live in a warm and loving home that my husband and I created together, grateful that even though it's a recession we will be OK, grateful to have love in my life, grateful that I have meaningful deep relationships with dear friends, grateful for good health and grateful that I have my daughter. I can even be grateful for the opportunity to love someone in spite of how challenging stepfamily life is because, in a way, it proves my love to him even more.

When I change my thinking and look at my life through a lens of gratitude, a perceptual shift happens and the day is lighter. And the more I focus on what is right, the less time I spend feeling down, frustrated or discouraged. I like that much better.

So, try it this month. Take a tip from Einstein and change your thinking. Focus on what is right instead of what is wrong and see if that helps the quality of your life. Let me know because I think it will make a big difference.

Oh, and one more thing for which I am grateful. I am so grateful to be able to have contact with a community of women that really understand what it is like to live the life of a stepmother. I can be my true self with all of you and know that I am not isolated and alone. We share a sisterhood and a bond that belongs to us. Thank you for being there. Happy Holidays.



Susan Swanson, LCSW, BCD, is the executive director and founder of The StepFamily Center in Beverly Hills, Calif. She is a noted authority on issues involving divorced and remarried families. Through The StepFamily Center, she offers individual and couples counseling, support groups and a newsletter. She also has a weekly radio show, The Susan Swanson Show, that covers topics relevant to all relationships.

My Journal

In my life I am thankful for these things, both big and small:

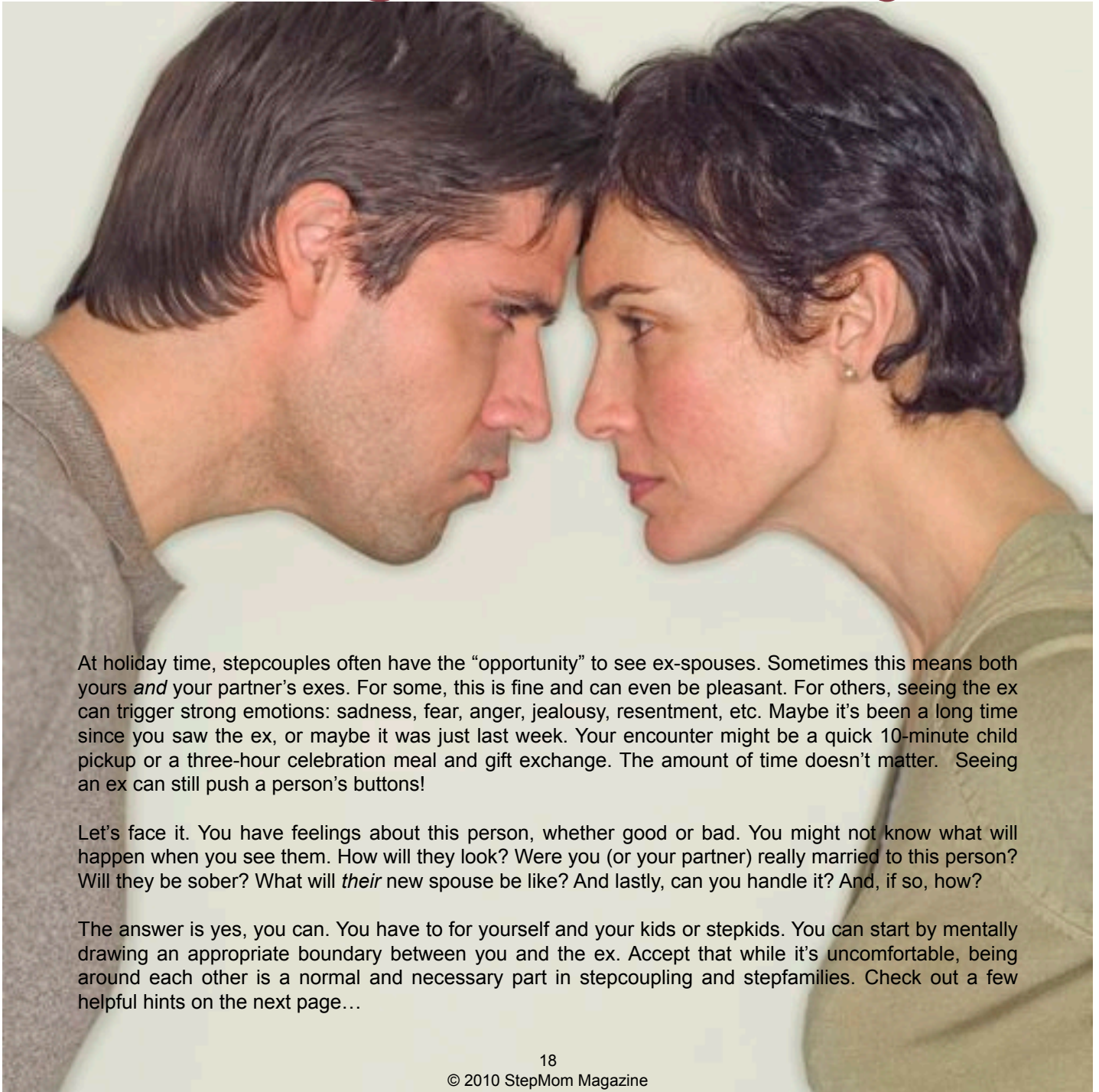


Ever wonder if anyone else feels like you do?
We asked our Facebook friends to weigh in.
Here's how they responded to the phrase
Being a stepmom is...



By Susan Wisdom, LPC
Author: "Stepcoupling"

Encounters with Exes During the Holidays



At holiday time, stepcouples often have the “opportunity” to see ex-spouses. Sometimes this means both yours *and* your partner’s exes. For some, this is fine and can even be pleasant. For others, seeing the ex can trigger strong emotions: sadness, fear, anger, jealousy, resentment, etc. Maybe it’s been a long time since you saw the ex, or maybe it was just last week. Your encounter might be a quick 10-minute child pickup or a three-hour celebration meal and gift exchange. The amount of time doesn’t matter. Seeing an ex can still push a person’s buttons!

Let’s face it. You have feelings about this person, whether good or bad. You might not know what will happen when you see them. How will they look? Were you (or your partner) really married to this person? Will they be sober? What will *their* new spouse be like? And lastly, can you handle it? And, if so, how?

The answer is yes, you can. You have to for yourself and your kids or stepkids. You can start by mentally drawing an appropriate boundary between you and the ex. Accept that while it’s uncomfortable, being around each other is a normal and necessary part in stepcoupling and stepfamilies. Check out a few helpful hints on the next page...

Use these helpful hints for dealing with an ex (yours or your partner's) this holiday season:

TIP #1

Prepare yourself emotionally so you can bring your best to the table. Visualize the day. Imagine what you'll say and how you'll act.

TIP #2

Note that you don't have to be perfect. Be yourself, which is good enough. Provide a handshake and a smile. Treat the ex with respect, as he or she is the biological parent of the children you have in common.

TIP #3

If an argument arises, try not to escalate it. Don't fight fire with fire, especially in front of the kids. Alcohol tends to excite anger, so keep it to a minimum.

TIP #4

Stand tall and breathe. Think clearly. Remember you can only control yourself, not anyone else.

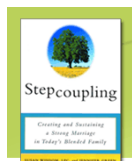
TIP #5

Respect and be curious about the ex. Try to understand their situation. Stay clear of judgments and criticisms as much as possible.

TIP #6

Be proud and glad when the pressure is over. You did just fine!

At the end of the day, relax and know the encounter is over. Move on and put the ex out of your mind. Be present with your partner and your kids and enjoy your holiday time together as a family.



Susan Wisdom, LPC, is author of *Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's Blended Family*. Susan and her husband have raised 5 children in their successful stepfamily since 1976. She has a counseling practice helping stepcouples understand and deal with the issues common in stepfamilies. She believes that the stepcouple is the foundation and glue in the stepfamily. Visit: <http://www.stepcoupling.com>

Legal Matters

Ask Lara



Lara Badain is an attorney specializing in marital and family law. She is licensed to practice in New York State and the State of California. To contact Lara directly for a personal consultation call: 585-385-2510.

Introducing Kids to Potential Stepparents

QUESTION

I asked my husband to leave the house in April 2009, but ultimately he opted to live in the guest bedroom until he finally got his own apartment this May. We are mediating for divorce and are making slow progress. The process has been delayed primarily because we are waiting to learn the monetary value of his pensions, as well as so he can find a break in his work schedule so we can meet with the mediator.

My concern has to do with protecting my best interest. I have started dating a man and have reached a point where I wanted my kids to meet him. I discussed it with the kids' therapist, and I had the therapist discuss with the children how they feel about it. The therapist stated she believed they children were ready for this introduction, and I followed her suggestions to make the introduction easier for them. My husband, however, is upset with my choice to introduce this new person to them. I want to be certain there is no way he can use any of the facts against me.

Please let me know what I should keep in mind. Thank you.

ANSWER

Excellent question. While you are not a stepparent, I want to answer this question because you raise an issue that is inevitable—the first introduction to the new partner and *potential* stepparent. Initially, let me say that I applaud you for consulting with the kids' therapist in advance. You would be surprised by how many people do not bother with the input from a mental health professional when these types of significant issues arise. Plus, this is a tricky area because you don't want to start introducing children to every date you have. Most mental health professionals will tell you that the children are better served by only meeting those individuals with whom you can foresee a long term relationship and that introductions shouldn't occur until you have been seeing the person for a reasonable amount of time. Obviously, the main concern is to limit the amount of upheaval in the children's lives in the event the person doesn't stick around too long. I also applaud you for continuing the process of mediating your divorce. Mediation is always preferable to litigation if circumstances allow. As far as your concern whether your husband would use against you the fact that you introduced the children to your new partner, I think you need not worry. First of all, you are mediating an agreement whereby you are presumably going to address all of the issues related to custody and visitation. Thus, the only way he could use your decision against you would be if he were in court trying to demonstrate you don't have the children's best

continued...

interests in mind or are engaging in behavior that may be harmful to them. (He would have to argue, for example, that you are indiscriminately introducing the kids to men you haven't known for very long). Since you are mediating and not litigating, he really won't have an opportunity to use anything against you. Second, you didn't do anything harmful. Rather, you not only waited several months—it sounds like—before introducing your anyone to anyone new in your romantic life, but you also sought the guidance of the therapist in advance of making any such decision. That demonstrates that you absolutely have the children's best interests in mind and that you were acting responsibly by checking with the therapist first. The only thing he might be able to say is—if, in the course of your mediation, you are agreeing to a "joint custody" arrangement—that you didn't consult with him before making the decision to introduce the children to your new boyfriend. (A joint custody arrangement implies that you consult with each other when making major decisions on health, education and spiritual matters.) However, there really isn't much more your husband could do besides complain. Even if you had consulted with him or if he had expressed his opposition to you introducing the kids to your new partner, ultimately you could still introduce them. Moreover, even if your husband were to abandon the mediation approach and take you to court, your introduction of your new partner to your children—especially under the circumstances that you consulted the children's therapist—is not likely enough to justify an award of sole custody to your husband. Of course, without having more overall facts about your situation, I cannot say for certain, but based on these facts alone it seems unlikely. Perhaps in the future you could consult with your husband—or at least have the appearance of consulting with him—about these sorts of decisions so he feels as though he has something to say about it. If you cover yourself this way, he really won't have much to complain about. Lastly, I also note that sometimes the ex spouse has a problem with these introductions not because they really believe it is an inappropriate action that might be detrimental to the children but because they are still in pain over the split. I mention this only so you can be sensitive to his emotions in order to discourage him from using his emotions to fuel unnecessary litigation.

**Do you have a legal question for Lara?
Email it to: StepMomMagazine@gmail.com**



The views or opinions expressed in this column are not intended as legal advice to be relied upon by the reader. It is highly recommended that readers consult with their own legal counsel in their state of residency for specific legal advice. StepMom Magazine is not an attorney referral service nor does it make any recommendations or endorsements of the use of any attorney's services.

Thanks *and* Misgivings



An excerpt from "The 40-Year-Old Version: Humours of a Divorced Dad"

By Joel Schwartzberg

I'm looking at a photo of myself topless.

I'm five years old, playing the role of an Indian in my kindergarten Thanksgiving Day play, red war paint on my chest and cheeks, and a paper feather painfully stuck in my head. I remember being much more concerned about exposing my naked chest than about some historical sit-down between Pilgrims and Indians.

Thirty-five years and many thousands of tuition dollars later, I still don't like being shirtless in public, and also don't know much more about Thanksgiving's true origins than I did then. So I did something I never would have dreamed of back in elementary school. I Googled Thanksgiving.

This is what we know: A long time ago, some 130 restless Europeans cashed in their frequent sailor miles for adventurous times — and a helping of religious freedom — in the New World. They brought their families, rats, and funky buckle hats. The Wampanoag Indians, happy to see the Pilgrims in the way deer are happy to see an oncoming tractor trailer, gave them corn and helped them survive the harsh winter. In return, the Pilgrims gave them small pox. The Pilgrims and Native Americans had a big three-day meal with turkey, squash and succotash, then settled back on comfy reclining rocks to watch young patriots and Indians run around and tackle each other.

Later-arriving Europeans introduced the natives to even more disease, prejudice, religious imperialism, really bad dancing, liquor, and, many moons later, garish casinos. One generation after the first Pilgrims accepted the natives' generous help, the two groups were attacking each other instead of turkeys.

The relationship was probably doomed from the start. For one thing, the natives were probably still peeved at being called Indians, based on Christopher Columbus' misidentifying his destination as the West Indies. (That ship was mostly populated by men, so you can be sure no one stopped to ask for directions). In fact, ancient Algonquian writings were recently translated to say: "That Columbus idiot couldn't navigate his way out of a corn husk."

Fast forward half a millennium or so, and we're still replaying some of those early customs. We still carve turkeys, set our tables for guests, and stereotype Native Americans. Some of us watch the Patriots and the Redskins knock each other around over a pigskin. And our relations with guests go from cordial to confrontational by the third bottle

of gift wine. There were no Thanksgiving Day parades during Pilgrim times, of course, but it's quite possible Willard Scott was there.

We like to think we're more civilized than our Mayflower forefathers, but not everything about today's Thanksgiving is an improvement. For one thing, I don't think the Pilgrims would tolerate hours of standstill holiday traffic the way we do today. Especially with the little Pilgrimettes whining in the back: "Father, hath we arrived yet? And willest thou change the radio station?"

In my first life as a father, Thanksgiving started with everyone getting up early and watching the Thanksgiving Day Parade on television. We yawned through the marching bands, delighted at the majestic floats, and gawked at B-level music stars moving their freezing lips to songs they'd come to hate. By the early afternoon, the kitchen would be abuzz with rolling, chopping, basting, sweating, and swearing.

Inevitably, someone would become inordinately worried about the turkey. Was it taking too long to cook? Was it too pink? Too dry? Was it organic, or did it have track marks on its leg? Was it really a chicken?

We complimented everything on the table for fear of insulting a contributing guest: "This salt is so good and salty! Who here made this salt? And this water is to die for!" Meanwhile, my Dad looked longingly at the mute television as if it were calling out to him.

My ex and I plan to switch Turkey Day custody every year, so last year I spent my first Thanksgiving in nearly a decade without my kids. I yakked on about the weather, car troubles, and work as I usually do, but it still felt somewhat wrong, as if someone forgot to invite the turkey.

The day after Thanksgiving, Anne and I took the kids to Disney's High School Musical on Ice. What could be more patriotic than ice dancers simulating basketball to a syrupy Disney soundtrack? The kids were mesmerized, and I dropped cash at the souvenir stand as if I was competing for their attention with Thanksgiving itself.

When we got home, we immediately dropped our Disney gear, kicked off our shoes, and flopped on the couch to watch the previous day's parade on the DVR. In the kitchen, Anne was making chicken and French fries. Lazy cats were warming the furniture all around us.

With the familiar smell of comfort food in the air, I realized that all traditions -- even late-coming ones -- have a starting point. This was ours.

And these days, I get to keep my shirt on. If that's not something to be thankful for, I don't know what is.



A perfect holiday gift for the man in your life!



The father of three kids and husband to a wonderful stepmom, **Joel Schwartzberg** is an award-winning essayist and author of "The 40-Year-Old Version: Humoires of a Divorced Dad" (www.bookfordad.com). His essays have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *New Jersey Monthly*, *The New York Daily News*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and parenting magazines around the country.

Crafts with Your Stepkids

Turkey Time!

By Wendy L. Deppe

Fall and Thanksgiving offer up so many craft opportunities. Here are some super simple projects!



Pinecone Turkey

Take a nature walk to find your supplies for this one!

Supplies:

- Fall leaves
- Pinecone
- Craft glue
- Wiggly eyes
- Small red pompoms
- Small scrap of orange construction paper
- Sheet of foam paper or cardboard for backdrop

Arrange leaves into a fan shape on your backdrop and glue into place. Glue pinecone on top of leaves. Carefully glue on wiggly eyes and pompoms for the wattle. Cut a tiny orange triangle for a beak and glue in place.

Turkey Lollipops

Make a bunch of these to give out as favors for your Thanksgiving gathering or make a “bouquet” of lollipops!

Supplies:

Plain lollipops in cellophane wrappers
Sheets of craft foam in fall colors
Wiggly eyes
Glue and Scissors



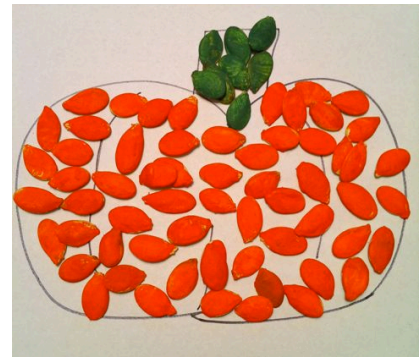
Begin by trimming the edges of the cellophane wrappers into circles. Cut 1-inch teardrop shapes out of the craft foam, 4 per lollipop. For each lollipop, cut a smaller teardrop shape for the turkey’s face. Glue the wiggly eyes onto the face, then glue the face onto the lollipop. Arrange the remaining teardrop shapes, fanning them for the turkey’s tail. Allow glue to dry.

Painted Pumpkin Seeds

Around our house we love pumpkin seeds —save some to eat while you work!

Supplies:

Pumpkin seeds (If you use fresh seeds from your own pumpkin, be sure to dry them thoroughly before painting.)
Duct tape
Orange and green acrylic paint
Paintbrush
Craft glue
Construction paper
Marker
Newspaper



Spread newspaper on your work surface. Tear off several long strips of duct tape and stick the ends together, making a circle with sticky-side-out. Lay circles of duct tape on the newspaper and stick the pumpkin seeds on the tape. This will keep them from sliding around while you paint them. Paint all but a few of the seeds orange. Paint a few seeds green. Allow to dry.

Draw a pumpkin shape onto a piece of paper or download a template from the Internet. Glue it onto a larger piece of construction paper. Once the painted seeds have dried, allow the children to arrange and glue the seeds onto the pumpkin.



Wendy Deppe welcomes comments at stepmomscrapbook@gmail.com and invites you to read her blog at <http://stepinthetrenches.blogspot.com>. Check out her books on Amazon: *The Stepmom Scrapbook* and *Diary of a Stepkid!*



Grief, Passion and the Holidays

By Mary Kelly-Williams, M.A.

It's hard to believe it's that time of year again. Thanksgiving is just around the corner and Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanza follow soon after.

For most stepmothers, many of whom are ex-wives and mothers themselves, the holidays bring on that familiar sense of dread, the feeling that someone is sitting on one's chest. The expectations of the "perfect holiday" come barging in on us, and we once again resolve to make the holidays "right" this time, anything to blot out the pain, grief and memories.

We think, "It's the holidays—a time of joy and merriment." When will we learn what a setup this is? We set ourselves up for failure before it's even November 15.

I have been in my remarriage for 10 years. Ending my marriage of 21 years was the most challenging road I've ever taken. I was unprepared for the grief that never goes away, despite my current happiness.

We seem to have this belief that if we make a decision that something will be good for us, we will be guilt-free or grief-free of the decision made. This has never been my experience—with my friends, clients or myself. Changing the structure of a family is a profound act and one that affects future generations for years to come. I've grieved and always will, one way or another, for the loss of the home "with the Mommy and the Daddy in it." I will always wince when I watch a Hallmark movie that shows a nuclear family that is loving and functional together.

My first Christmas in remarriage was a tense one. I was miserable. I was used to traditions being carried out a certain way. I was used to a certain sense of decorum that had worked well for my former husband and myself.

But my current husband was quite different. He's a playful kind of guy and his idea of Christmas was to throw away all sense of propriety and have some good old-fashioned fun. I found this appalling.

I'll never forget sitting at the beautifully set dinner table, the lavish meal and the sparkling and perfect decorations abounding in my home. I sat at the table with a very large glass of chardonnay, sipping feverishly as I watched the scene before me. My husband had bought obnoxious cans of silly string and had passed them out to my four teenagers and his 5-year-old daughter in the middle of our holiday meal. All five kids jumped up in delight and

proceeded to vandalize every corner of my home, laughing, giggling and having a ball.

No one noticed the obvious pity party I was having for myself, as I sat possessively holding my glass of wine and keeping the bottle nearby for much-needed refills. I was miserable. This wasn't what Christmas was supposed to look like!

I was stubbornly refusing to acknowledge that I no longer had the family that had gone along with the formalities, the china, and the pinkie finger extended as one graciously picked up their glass.

I had married a mountain man from Vail who had stolen my heart because of his joy for life. At that moment, I found him to be a savage and asked myself quite seriously what I had gotten myself into.

It may seem superficial. I can see why it would. But these were my traditions, and he had stolen them from under me. His daughter knew nothing about my traditions, nor did she care. Why should she?

I woke up the next morning (with a "minor" headache I might add due to the wicked white wine) relieved that the whole holiday affair was over and I could get back to my normal life. But I had forgotten. My children were leaving to go be with their father, and watching his car drive away with them in it left me with such a longing and a pain that I felt overcome by it. I suddenly felt like a foreigner in my own home when I was left with my husband and his daughter, who suddenly seemed like aliens to me. They just didn't do things the way I did.

Divorce grief. We remarry and think it should go away. But it does not, at least not for many. There are times we think back on those days with our former partners and make them better and brighter than they ever were.

I think back to the time not so long ago. It was my first Christmas after the divorce, my first Christmas as a single person in 21 years. I couldn't afford to stay in the family home—a dream home that had taken two years to renovate in order to create the perfect space for a once-perfect family.

As previously agreed upon, my former husband had the kids on Christmas. His parents (suddenly my new ex-in-laws) had flown in for the holiday. Traditions die hard, and I was invited over Christmas morning to exchange gifts and try to provide some sense of normalcy to our children who, at the time, were in the throes of ranging from pre-adolescence to full-blown teenage hood.

I arrived early and walked into the familiar sights and feel of my home. The in-laws I had known for over a quarter of a century were as familiar as the smell of the Christmas tree.

Yet, I felt like a stranger, an intruder.

Smiles were slapped on the faces of the adults while we all tried to pretend that for this one morning, nothing had changed. Everything was the same. We were a family, and Santa had decided that we were nice instead of naughty. Presents were in abundance, almost to a ridiculous level, as if the gifts could replace the loss of the no longer intact family.

The children played along. They were especially grateful for everything they got and gushed with pleasure while anxiously watching the eyes of their parents, alert for signs of sadness or perhaps, maybe, even a change of heart.

Sooner than I was ready to, it was time to go. Another woman was coming to the house to share the rest of the day with my ex-husband, his parents, and my children. It was time for me to go. I really needed to go.

I left with the big fake smile still slapped on my face, hugging my children tightly, maybe a little too tightly. Assuring them I was fine, I was good. Have a great day. Enjoy the day. Enjoy your grandparents. Enjoy your new gifts. Yes, I'm fine, good. Really. I'll see you tomorrow.

I drove away with my heart on fire. Burning hot coal flames of fire. Spokes of fire piercing my heart. How could



anything hurt this much?

The next morning, hours before the arrival of my children, I wandered downtown to walk on the familiar downtown mall, a mall so quaint and inviting perhaps maybe I wouldn't feel so alone.

My heart was still on fire. No substance on earth could extinguish the raging wildfire or the passion I had in missing my children.

I passed a store and a painting caught my eye. A painting that stopped me in my tracks. It was a simple painting. A painting with a bright red tree...a passionate tree...a tree on fire.

I stormed into that store and made an impulsive buy, no matter the price. I wanted the painting of the tree that looked liked consuming red flames to remind me of this intense love I had for my children that first post-divorce Christmas morning.

Yes, I was sad. Yes, I was devastated. But looking at that tree reminded me of my own Christmas blessings, the blessing of a passionate love. The gift of each one of my children, the love of my children, the love for my children. The love that only parenting brings.

The painting hangs on the wall by the side of my bed. It's been a dozen Christmases since then. The passion for my children continues to burn as brightly as ever. The holidays still continue to bring the spiral of grief back into my life. I still hate the splitting of the holiday. I'll never get used to that. But the focus is on the gifts, the gift of each one on my children and the gift of my husband and his daughter.

Be kind to yourself this holiday season. Have compassion for your children who have to go back and forth to share the holidays with their parents, have compassion for your stepchildren who have to do the same, and—since it's the holiday season—try having compassion for your husband's ex. She certainly must carry her own burden of grief, no matter how well you think she may cover it. Get rid of the expectations that disappoint, the longing for the perfect stepfamily. We will never achieve perfection, nor will our spouses, children or stepchildren.

Know that the grief may always be there, coming in and out of your life like small waves lapping onto the shore. Although grief is uncomfortable, it is always temporary and it reminds us that we are human.

And it may help to remember that we grieve because we love.



Mary Kelly-Williams, M.A. is a therapist, mother of four, and ally to her husband's daughter. Mary practices in Boulder, Colorado and regularly conducts workshops for couples and women with stepchildren. As well as in-person counseling, Mary offers telephone stepparent coaching. For more information, visit her website: www.marriedwithbaggage.com

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS: HOW TO KEEP THANKSGIVING FROM BEING A

TOTAL TURKEY!



By Susan Wisdom, LPC
Author: "Stepcoupling"

Thanksgiving is coming. Excitement is high for delicious food, fires in the fireplace, people sharing homemade recipes, drinks and, most of all, fond feelings with family and friends. Sounds great, doesn't it?

We all know how Thanksgiving is portrayed in storybooks, movies and perfect television shows like "Father Knows Best." The media loves sugar-coated stories. Those of us in stepcouples and stepfamilies wonder how we can get there. Sadly, we work so hard to achieve the picture perfect Thanksgiving—whatever that is!

The problem is we try too hard. We set ourselves up for a meltdown, or at least some sort of disappointment. You can be certain during the expectation-filled holiday season that someone will be misunderstood, get their feelings hurt, act badly or initiate an argument. It happens, and somehow we recover.

I remember one Thanksgiving many years ago. I tried particularly hard because I had invited another family to join us for dinner. I wanted the day to be fabulous! The breakdown occurred while cooking dessert. My stepdaughter and I were working together in the kitchen. We disagreed on how to prepare some of the ingredients for the fancy French dessert I had planned. (Note: This was the perfect setup with high expectations ripe for failure and disappointment!) My stepdaughter and I argued about how to prepare the meringue, slice the fruit or something stupid like that. We both were stubborn. She stormed out of the house and was gone for hours. I felt horrible. I was so not into that dumb dessert after that. I was angry at her and at myself for not handling the situation better.

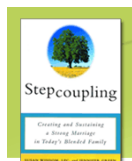
Much later, I was able to step back and look at why this happened. I had set myself up for stress I didn't need. Wouldn't we have been better off with ice cream sundaes? Wouldn't I have been better off if I'd been able to calm myself down and handle the situation better? I was too stuck on creating the perfect Thanksgiving, which meant serving a fancy French dessert. I learned the hard way.

Here are some tips to help stepcouples and stepfamilies keep their expectations in line during the holiday season:

Lighten up. Know your limits and accept them. Keep things simple and manageable. Remember you're supposed to enjoy the day, not spend it working and fussing over the details!

If conflict occurs, step back, breathe, think and reflect on your feelings and words before responding. (Remember Lisa Bagshaw's article last month about being the mother ship?!) Don't react prematurely. Try to understand the other person's thoughts and vulnerabilities, as well as your own.

Get help! Go to your partner, a relative or friend who understands you. Hopefully that person can listen, hear you and help you calm down. Try it. It works!



Susan Wisdom, LPC, is author of *Stepcoupling: Creating and Sustaining a Strong Marriage in Today's Blended Family*. Susan and her husband have raised 5 children in their successful stepfamily since 1976. She has a counseling practice helping stepcouples understand and deal with the issues common in stepfamilies. She believes that the stepcouple is the foundation and glue in the stepfamily. Visit: <http://www.stepcoupling.com>

A Stepmom's Best Friend

By Lisa Bagshaw

You probably thought I was going to say vodka. Although I do drown the odd stepmom sorrow in a glass of sauvignon blanc, I've decided that a stepmom's best friend is her girlfriends.

I am the type of woman who has clusters of girlfriends. For example, I have a group of four women I see from high school. I won't tell you how long ago that was, but suffice to say it was a long time ago, and if you've been friends for that long there has to be a reason. Then there is a group of four gals that I summited Mount Kilimanjaro with for the Make-A-Wish Foundation five years ago. Although they are only six-year-old friendships, when you accomplish something like that together without dying, you are bonded for life. I have another group of four girlfriends whom I met through a rather larger-than-life girlfriend about 15 years ago. We've been through divorces, boyfriends, weddings and a horrific death together. So, we also are also very bonded.

I have met loads of other fabulous women along the way whom I've loved and adored, but these are the ones who know me the best.

continued...



Each group is on a bit of a silent schedule. One group is on a six-week plan, another monthly and the other is a little less often. Some of the individuals in the groups are weekly workout buddies, running friends or dog walking companions. Sometimes, we get together over a glass of wine or a bite to eat. It has always been a priority for me to regularly see my girlfriends.

But in a recent opportunity to get together with one of the groups, it occurred to me that I never have my friends over to my house. When I lived alone in a trendy part of town, I always had friends over, but since I've been living with my husband for the last five years it doesn't happen. I thought, maybe I'm becoming a bit of a 'drive-by' friend. You know the type: she's in and out, all flash and no substance, never really sharing what's going on in her life.

And I wondered why am I doing this? Why am I keeping my home life with my husband and my stepkids separate from my friends? Why am I not letting them into such an important part of my life?

So, I decided to invite one of the groups over to my house for dinner when the kids and my husband were home. I thought to myself, 'If I'm going to let them into my world, I want them to see all of it.' They were more than thrilled to come over. I felt a tinge of nervousness anticipating their arrival. Would they think me less fabulous when they see my unglamorous life? Or was it me? Was I afraid to let them into my world because it would mean I am not the same person; that I have changed, grown or become different? Is it me who hasn't embraced my life as a stepmom?

They arrived bearing loads of food and wine, and we ate and drank outside by candlelight well into the night. We laughed harder than I have laughed in a long time. There were tears. We told old classic stories about each other. I felt a kinship that I had deeply missed.

My charming husband joined us for a glass of wine, entered into the raucous conversation and then discretely left us because he could see how engrossed we were in each other. The kids interacted with my friends and were just as cute and adorable as always. My worlds were meshing and everyone was getting to know each other better.

By spending just six hours in my world, my friends saw intimate pieces of my life they hadn't seen before. They saw—and smelled—the hockey bags in the middle of the living room. They saw an overgrown backyard. They saw me tuck the boys in to bed. They saw me work out some details for the following day with my husband. They saw me in a new light, which—for some reason—I was afraid to show them.

I thought that by keeping all of my worlds separate, that I could keep them all intact. What I hadn't realized was that in keeping them separate, I was separating myself, never fully sharing my life with others. That night, with my longtime friends in my home, I felt whole. I felt like I had reclaimed a part of myself that I had given up when I became a stepmom. I hadn't realized how much I needed these women to full in my life. I hadn't realized how much I needed them to feel whole.

In the future, I'm sure I will meet my gal pals at various bars, restaurants and their trendy apartments, but I'm also going to welcome them into my home any chance I can get. And I bet they'll want to come back!



Lisa Bagshaw is an Urban Stepmom (successful, childless career woman who meets a man with kids later in life) who married for the first time at 43. She balances a demanding career in media, and life with her husband, twin 10-year-old stepsons, a dog and two cats in Vancouver, BC. Catch her lessons learned at blog www.urbanstepmom.com or on twitter at [@urbanstepmom](https://twitter.com/urbanstepmom). She is currently writing a book "A Survival Guide for the Urban Stepmom" and is open to any and all tips.

Movie Review

“You Again” illustrates that many stepfamily “issues” are actually universal challenges, and that by overcoming our common obstacles, we can become better, happier individuals.



By Carrie Collins Fadell

As a testament to the fact that the rushed days of late summer are behind us, my husband and I had time for a date night recently. Actually, we are too cheap to spring for full-price movie tickets, so technically it was an afternoon matinee date. We saw the movie, “You Again,” which is about a young woman in her 20s (Kristen Bell), who finds out her brother is marrying her former classmate who made her life a living hell in high school. She then returns home to find her entire family, from the dog to her grandma, utterly smitten with the bride-to-be and monster from her past.

The caring mother in the movie (Jamie Lee Curtis) tries to usher the main character through the hurt from her past, urging her to just let it go and accept her future sister-in-law for who she is *now*. Mom’s tune changes when she finds out that the bride’s sophisticated and wealthy aunt (Sigourney Weaver) is her ex-best friend. This unleashes a torrent of hurt feelings from her past. Chaos, baggage and hilarity ensue in what is overall a pretty good movie.

What I find interesting is that for a movie that has *nothing* to do with stepfamilies, it has so many themes and situations that we deal with as stepmoms in everyday stepfamily life. The main character in the movie was dealing with the dual issues of standing up for herself against a bully and the anxiety and hurt feelings that can occur when families grow and change through events such as marriage and divorce. These can be all-too common themes in stepfamily life. As the story develops, the theme of jealousy often arises as the set of rivals jostle it out for control of the hearts of the family in a series of comedic scenes. While the rivals in this movie were dealing with the lingering pains of wounds inflicted by youth cruelty in high school, sometimes the rivalry between mom and stepmom or stepmom and stepchild can descend into what feels like an emotional quagmire that can cut deeper than any high school wound.

I also was struck by another stepfamily issue that was presented so well by a traditional nuclear family. The movie drove home the point that when we can’t let go of our past hurts, the people we end up hurting the most are those around us that we would least want to hurt. Stepmoms walk a constant emotional tightrope, often navigating the

difficult balance of letting go of perceived wrongs and fighting for our own space in our family unit. This can be a daily internal struggle. The trick is to not feel like a doormat or bystander in our own lives, but to be smart enough to not get dragged into battles that aren't ours to fight, are not winnable and aren't worth our time or energy.

The movie also confirmed for me what my mother often reminds me of and that is that a lot of emotional issues can feel as they are just "stepfamily issues," but they are really issues that belong to all families. That advice always makes me feel less isolated.

I left the movie theater feeling hopeful. It made me feel that some of the life lessons that we, as stepmoms, learn—often through the brutality of the battles we fight with ourselves, our partner, stepkids and the ex—are really life lessons that build our character and have the potential to make us better people. It is crucial to remember these clashes—some of which we win, lose or walk away from—are changing who we are, for better or worse. No matter how hard the situation, we need to attempt to get some positive, constructive growth out of our struggles. As a veteran of some intense stepfamily battles, I realize this can be a tall order. However, just as the characters in the movie were shaped—good and bad—by their experiences in high school, we are being shaped by our experiences within our stepfamily.

As I look toward the next phase of my stepmom journey, the transition of both of my stepchildren being out of the house and away at college in just over two short years, I am reminded that this stepmom gig is ever evolving. One day it will be just my husband and I. Surely the way we deal with stepfamily issues (communicating with his ex) and the issues that are a part of every family (car trouble, illness, motivating a 16-year-old to do their geometry homework) will shape the quality of the relationship that my husband and I have in the future. I am even more motivated to keep our relationship strong and let go of the daily pettiness.

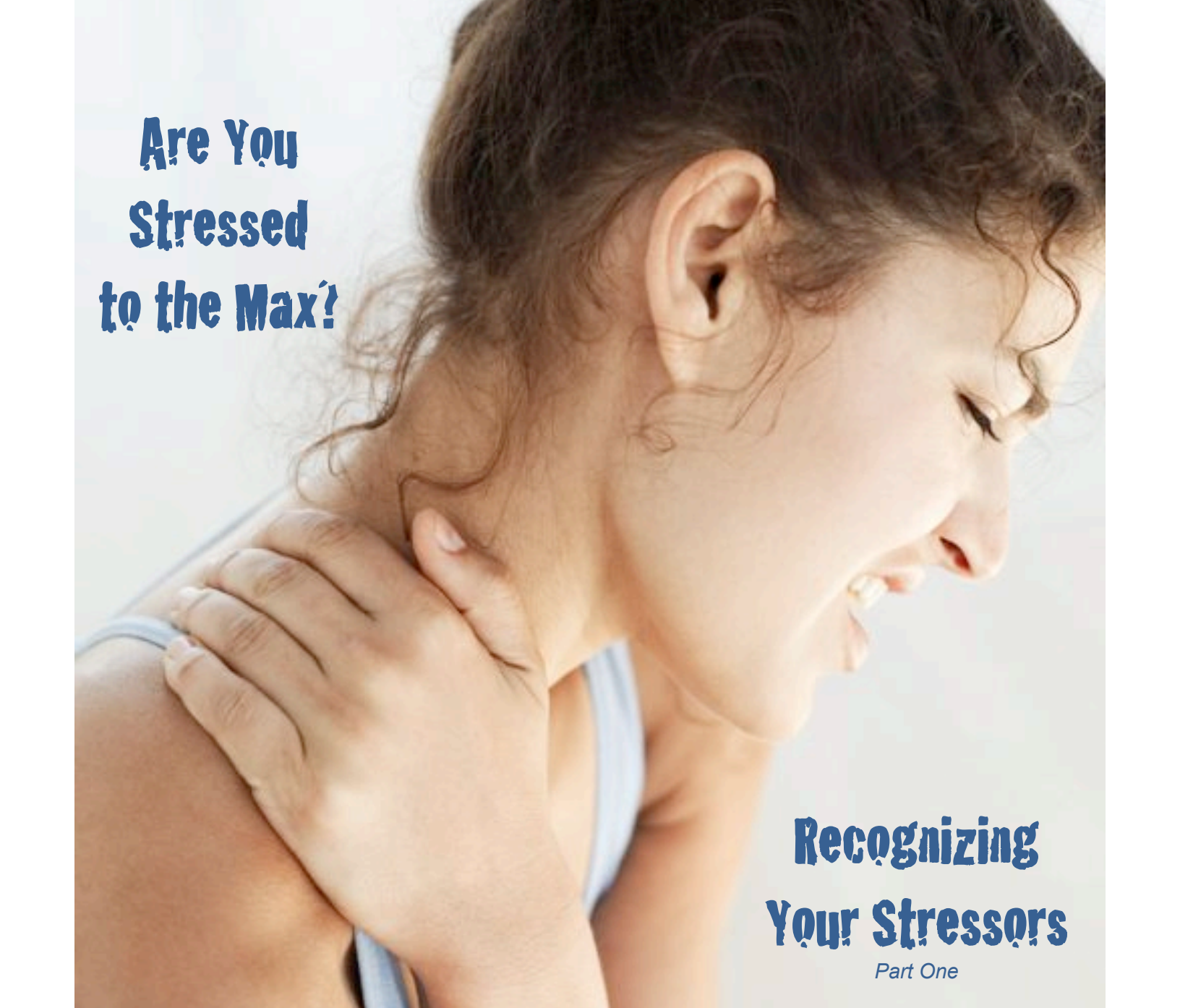
Art imitates life, life imitates art and there is a lot to learn from all of the types of families all around us. For me, "You Again," drove home the fact that if we don't deal with our hurt, it can change who we are for decades to come. In 2008, J. Worth Kilcrease, a Licensed Professional Counselor based in Austin, Texas, wrote an article for "Psychology Today," in which he noted that the old adage of "time heals all wounds" is misleading. It is more what we actively chose to do with that time that has the potential to heal us.



Photos: www.youagain-themovie.com.



Carrie Collins Fadell is a stepmom to two teen boys. You can find out more about her at www.carriecollinsfadell.com and more about the movie "You Again" at www.youagain-themovie.com.



**Are You
Stressed
to the Max?**

Recognizing Your Stressors

Part One

By Peggy Nolan, MA, RYT

“Stress is a state we experience when the demands that are put upon us cannot be counter balanced by our ability to deal with them.”—Richard Lazarus, University of California

Being a stepmom is a lot like having a chronic disease that affects the central nervous system. Most of the stepmoms I know and hear from are stretched and stressed beyond what I consider humanely possible. Is stress a disease? Not technically; but it most certainly puts you in a state of *dis-ease*.

Do you know that stress is linked to six leading causes of death? According to the American Psychological Association, chronic stress is a contributing factor to cancer, heart disease, lung disease, accidents, suicide and cirrhosis of the liver.

As a breast cancer survivor, I know all too well the effects chronic stress has on the body and in the body. I disregarded the signs that I was physically, mentally and emotionally unhealthy. My body responded by giving me the wake-up call no woman wants to hear: “You have breast cancer.”

continued...

“Chronic stress increases cytokines, which produce inflammation. Exposure to constant inflammation can damage arteries and other organs.”—Bruce McEwen, “The End of Stress as We Know It”

Between unhappiness in my first marriage, a stressful demanding career and raising two teenagers, I ate stress for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I ignored symptoms of a decaying marriage and the signs of an unfaithful husband. I didn't pay attention to the countless demands between work and family. I thought I was superwoman and that I could do anything and everything. Unfortunately, the stress in my life caught up with me. One bleak, cold, dark night seven years ago in January, I received the news I had breast cancer. Stress and unhappiness slithered and oozed throughout my life, and if I was going to fight the fight of my life, I realized I had to let go of these unhealthy attachments.

Do you know that unhappy emotions are linked to stress? Do you struggle with any of the following: Fear, anxiety, anger, resentment, sadness, hatred, dislike, jealousy and envy?

Eckhart Tolle, author of “A New Earth,” states these emotions “disrupt the energy flow through the body, affect the heart, immune system, digestion, etc.” Negative emotions harm not only our bodies, but also “infect the people you come in contact with,” and, in turn, your unhappiness infects the people with whom they come in contact. Unhappiness is like an oil spill of epic proportions.

Unhappiness is highly communicable and contagious. We spread unhappiness by complaining, blaming and making excuses. We increase our own unhappiness by focusing on and rehashing unpleasant events over and over again. If there's a generic ailment that plagues stepmoms, it's unhappiness. The negativity on message boards, forums and blogs has me worried for your health, well-being and marriages.

Nine times out of 10, the stressor isn't the problem. It's not your stepkids or your husband or his ex-wife and it's not your job or your boss. It's your perception of the stressor and how you deal with it that is the problem and the root cause of your unhappiness.

Does this sound familiar?

The old me internalized stress. I made it my own, and I became one with it. Whatever you want to call it, I suffered from martyrdom, the need to please and the need to prove I could do it all, have it all and fix it all. I was miserable and unhappy inside and out. I lived completely disconnected from my mind, body and spirit. My life was neither in balance, in harmony nor in integrity. I was not impeccable with my word. I took what others, especially my ex-husband, said or did personally. I made assumptions about nearly everything. And I was living a life based on what I thought everyone else expected me to be and do.

How I lived my life less than a decade ago was like an Exxon Valdez Meets BP Oil Spill Smack Down. How I lived my life less than a decade ago is how I see many of my sister stepmoms living their lives today. I desperately want to help you from receiving the same or similar wake-up call I received nearly seven years ago.

Your homework this month:

1. Make a list of all (yes, *all*) of your stressors.
2. Next to each stressor, write down how it makes you feel.
3. Write down how you currently deal with each stressor.

It's time to get real: How much time do you spend obsessing over past hurts or rehashing unpleasant events? Do you make yourself and others pay for the same mistake over and over again?

Next month, Peggy will share with you her secrets on reducing stress, becoming and staying cancer free, finding her own everlasting happiness and how she spreads happiness to those around her.



Peggy Nolan loves teaching stepmoms how to stand in their power and expand their wholeness of mind, body, and spirit. Peggy is a Self-Care coach and certified yoga teacher. She is the mother of two and the bonus mother of four. Peggy hosts “The Stepmom's Toolbox Radio Show” on www.blogtalkradio.com. Connect with Peggy at either www.thestepmomstoolbox.com or www.infiniteyogaandreiki.com

STEPMOMS:
THIS HOLIDAY
SEASON GIVE
YOURSELF
THE GIFT OF
PEACE



By Heather Hetchler
Custodial Stepmom & Creator:
www.cafesmom.com

Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.—Unknown

As a stepmom, we know that having complete peace in our life is nearly impossible. Yet, we still yearn for it. Peace in our home. Peace in our relationship. Peace with the ex-wife. Peace with our stepkids. And peace within ourselves.

Given the number of relationships that we have to balance, it is unrealistic to expect daily serenity. Our partner, his ex-wife or the memory of his deceased spouse, our stepkids, our in-laws, our partner's former in-laws, our parents, and often our own children and ex-husband all impact the peaceful quality of our life. Juggling all of these relationships can be difficult, but we can weather the storms of stepfamily life when we have peace in our own hearts.

*WHILE PEACE IN THOSE RELATIONSHIPS MAY REALISTICALLY BE
OUT OF OUR CONTROL, PEACE IN OUR HEARTS IS POSSIBLE.*

As the holiday season approaches, it is important for our emotional and physical well-being to fill our hearts with peace. Follow these five steps for creating and maintaining a peaceful heart:

Pick and choose your battles. We could probably get upset multiple times a day or week over schedule changes, dirty looks from the stepkids, misunderstandings with our partner or hurtful and untrue words about us from the ex-wife by way of the children. The list could go on.

But where does that leave us? Getting upset doesn't bring peace to our life but rather leaves us feeling frustrated,

exhausted and alienated. Don't let other people and situations have that type of power over you. Don't let them dictate how you will feel.

SOMETIMES WINNING IS KNOWING WHEN TO LET SOMETHING GO.

As a stepmom, we could literally spend all of our emotional and physical energy fighting battles. But who really wins? At the end of the day, we've got nothing left to give to ourselves, our family, our partner, our relationship. Even if we "win" the battle, we are losing the war to bring peace into our heart and into our home.

If there is a conflict that reoccurs often, ask yourself if there is a solution. If there is a plausible resolution then take steps to implement it and if there is not one then let it go.

Embrace each day as a new beginning. We had a bad day. We fought with our partner over something kid related. We feel invisible and taken for granted. That's very typical in the life of a stepmom. Tomorrow is a new day. Wipe the slate clean. Forgive yourself, your partner and your stepkids and move on.

Harboring anger leads to bitterness and resentment which can eat us alive. When that happens, who is the real winner? Not us. Peace and bitterness cannot co-exist. Give yourself permission to have a bad day and start over the next morning.

Allow for margin in your life. This is super important. We need to practice positive self-care. Make sure we are sleeping enough at night, getting regular medical check-ups, eating healthy and getting some form of exercise.

It is also important to recognize what triggers unhappy feelings related to our stepfamily. If the time when our stepkids get dropped off at our house is difficult for us, then make it a point to not be home during that time. If we get fired up over things our stepkids' mom did or said to them then don't ask about their time with their mom.

SELF-CARE ISN'T SELFISH, IT'S ESSENTIAL.

You are a better partner, stepmom, mom and friend when you take care of yourself.

Count your blessings. Simply put, if we are focused on the positives in our lives then the negative stuff has a hard time penetrating our happy hearts.

When everything around us seems to be crumbling, we need to focus our thoughts on the positive. Ask yourself what are you thankful for? There is always something for which we can give thanks. Doesn't matter how big or how small it is.

Negativity doesn't stand a chance against a grateful heart. Think positive.

Enjoy your relationship with your partner. We are stepmoms because we love our partners. Focus on and nurture that relationship. Make date night a priority. Date night doesn't have to mean an expensive night on the town. It can be a movie on the couch after the kids go to bed. Just make sure to focus on why we are stepmoms—the love of our lives.

I know. Easier said than done. But practice the five steps to peace and see what changes for you. The only things you have to lose are stress, self-doubt and many headaches. And with a peace-filled heart, your holiday season can be less stressful and more peaceful. That is one of the greatest gifts you can give to yourself.



Heather Hetchler has a heart for stepmoms. She blogs about the ups and downs, joys and frowns of being a stepmom. She enjoys consulting with stepmoms to help them navigate the muddy waters of stepfamily life. She is the mom of four and custodial stepmom of two. She resides in Cleveland with her husband and six children. Visit at www.CafeSmom.com

My Stepdad's Favorites

This November, I have so many things for which to be thankful, I don't know where to start. I'm so thankful my stepdad has made it through nine days in the hospital for heart and lung issues and is now out of rehab after breaking his hip. Go, Jack! It just amazes me how well he has done with all of the health problems he has faced throughout the past two months. I'm also so thankful for my friends who have supported me through the stress during this time. This may not seem like a typical November food issue, but I want to dedicate this edition to my stepdad and his amazing and ongoing recovery. Here are a couple of his favorite dishes, which—due to his restricted diet—he doesn't get to enjoy nearly as often as before.

Since these aren't necessarily Thanksgiving recipes, I have a compromise. I will happily answer any and all questions regarding cooking in general or Thanksgiving specifically via email from November 1-15 at elizabeth@relishmiami.com.

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!

-Elizabeth

**Pan Fried Pierogies with Potato Filling
Spiced Pear on a Bed of Arugula with Goat Cheese, Prosciutto and Walnuts**



www.relishmiami.com



Elizabeth Guerra is the owner of Relish in Miami, Florida. She's a stepmom, an accomplished caterer, personal chef, and a regular contributor to StepMom Magazine.

Pan Fried Pierogies with Potato Filling

2 cups flour, plus extra for kneading and rolling dough
½ teaspoon salt
1 large egg
½ cup sour cream, plus extra to serve with the pierogi
¼ cup butter, softened and cut into small pieces
4 tablespoons butter
1 onion, chopped
Potato and cheese filling (recipe follows)

Dough

Mix together the flour and salt. Beat the egg, then add the flour mixture all at once. Add the ½ cup sour cream and the softened butter pieces and work until the dough loses most of its stickiness, about 5 to 7 minutes. You can use a food processor with a dough hook for this, but be careful not to overwork the dough or it will be tough. Wrap the dough in plastic and refrigerate for 20 to 30 minutes or overnight. The dough can be kept in the refrigerator for up to 2 days. Each batch of dough makes 12 to 15 pierogies.

Potato/Onion Filling

5 large red potatoes, peeled, cubed and boiled until tender
1 large onion, minced
½ pound bacon, cut into smaller pieces
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese

Fry the bacon until crisp. Remove to plate lined with paper towels. In same pan, fry the onion in the bacon drippings until tender.

Drain the potatoes and mash thoroughly. Combine with the cheese, onion and bacon. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Form potato filling into one-inch balls.

Assembly and Cooking:

Bring a large pot of water to a boil.

Roll the pierogi dough on a floured board or countertop until 1/8-inch thick. Cut 2-inch circles of dough using a cookie cutter or glass. Place a small ball of filling (about 1 tablespoon) on each dough round and fold the dough over, forming a semi-circle. Moisten the edges slightly with water. Press the edges together with the tines of a fork.

Boil the pierogies a few at a time in a large pot of water. They are done when they float to the top (about 8 to 10 minutes). Rinse in cool water and let dry. Sauté chopped onions in butter in a large pan until onions are soft. Add pierogies and pan fry until lightly crisp. Serve with a side of sour cream.



Spiced Pear on a Bed of Arugula with Goat Cheese, Prosciutto and Walnuts

Spiced Pears

2 pears, peeled, cored, and cut into bite-sized pieces
3 tablespoon butter
1 tablespoon brown sugar
½ teaspoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ginger

In a medium sauté pan, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the pears; sprinkle with the sugar and spices. Stir to coat. Cook on medium heat, stirring often until the pears are just getting tender; about 4 minutes. Remove to a clean bowl and let cool to room temperature.

Salad

4 cups baby arugula (one big package will do it, or 2 bags)
4 tablespoon goat cheese (one small log)
4 slices prosciutto, torn into bite sized pieces
½ cup walnut halves, toasted

Dressing

¼ cup champagne vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
½ cup vegetable oil (don't use olive oil for this recipe)
Salt and pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients and adjust seasoning.

Compose Salad:

In a large bowl, toss the arugula with about ¾ of the dressing. Plate an equal amount onto four plates. Top with 1 tablespoon of goat cheese per salad, one piece of torn prosciutto, four to six walnut halves and finally ¼ cup of spiced pears.

If you have any leftover pear mixture, it is delicious over vanilla gelato with a drizzle of local honey and an almond biscotti.



Words of Wisdom



**“ADVERSITY IS LIKE A STRONG WIND.
IT TEARS AWAY FROM US ALL BUT THE
THINGS THAT CANNOT BE TORN,
SO THAT WE SEE OURSELVES
AS WE REALLY ARE.”
- ARTHUR GOLDEN**

**“WHEN EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE
GOING AGAINST YOU, REMEMBER THAT
THE AIRPLANE TAKES OFF AGAINST
THE WIND, NOT WITH IT.”
- HENRY FORD**



**“THE PESSIMIST COMPLAINS ABOUT THE WIND;
THE OPTIMIST EXPECTS IT TO CHANGE;
THE REALIST ADJUSTS THE SAILS.”
- WILLIAM ARTHUR WARD**