Family Traditions: Making Them Work For You

Family traditions are universally found in families of all types. They contain the values, myths, history, and identity of the family; connect the generations; and are a source of strength, stability, roots, and pride for families. At the same time, traditions may foster feelings of obligation and responsibility. They can be a source of hassles as special preparations (arranging family get-togethers, planning and preparing meals, etc.) are frequently required. Elements from more than one family may need to be incorporated while maintaining the meanings of traditions. Middle generation members of families may be responsible for much of this work as they assume roles and responsibilities from older family members who can no longer fulfill them. Women, the “kinkeepers,” tend to be the most affected. Understanding one's traditions and being intentional about them keeps them as a source of joy and comfort rather than a burden and obligation.

In their book, Rituals for Our Times, Imber-Black and Roberts discuss five purposes of rituals or traditions. These are:

1. **Relating:** *Shaping, Expressing, and Maintaining Relationships.* Traditions can help you understand various aspects of your relationships (Who has power? What is expected of individuals? etc.) and help you to rework relationship patterns, rules, roles and opportunities.

2. **Changing:** *Making and Marking Transitions for Ourselves and Others.* Traditions have the capacity to announce and create changes while making them safe and manageable. At the same time, traditions often have to be modified to reflect the change and growth of individuals. For example, shifting the number of candles on a cake, which are appropriate for a young child, to trick candles for preteens recognizes growth and change.

3. **Healing:** *Recovering from Relationship Betrayal, Trauma, or Loss.* Everyone has times when personal and relationship healing is needed (for example, in the event of a death or divorce). For traditions to help in the healing process, individuals must often make changes allowing them to
hold on (to memories and symbols that are comforting, precious, and healthy) and let go (of what is painful, unhealthy, and what you have no control over) at the same time. The intent is not to remain stuck in the past or unable to move forward in meaningful ways.

4. **Believing:** *Voicing Beliefs and Making Meaning.* Every time you participate in a ritual or tradition you are expressing your beliefs. For example:

   Bedtime rituals express beliefs in a certain kind of parent-child relationship where warmth, affection and safety are available.

   Thanksgiving is a time many families use to express what they are thankful for, sharing beliefs about what is most important to them. The fact that Thanksgiving is the most traveled of all American holidays expresses a value about connecting with others face-to-face despite long distances that may separate people.

   Birthdays and anniversary celebrations express our ideas about the passage of time in our lives.

   If a particular tradition has become extremely routine, empty, meaningless, or even oppressive to you, it likely no longer captures and expresses what you personally believe. Traditions that remain alive and meaningful continue to connect with deeply held beliefs and values. They also have room for variations that express changing norms and opinions while still anchoring families with a sense of shared history.

5. **Celebrating:** *Affirming Deep Joy and Honoring Life with Festivity.* Most life cycle rituals (weddings, funerals, and graduations), religious and cultural holiday traditions, birthdays, and anniversaries involve celebrating. You can celebrate the accomplishments of an individual, the positive elements of a relationship, the warmth and caring in a family. Traditions containing celebration express warmth, comfort, support, affirmation of life, and a sense of being connected to others. If you come away from traditions where you feel anxious, exhausted, hypocritical, or cut off from yourself or others, then one of traditions' key functions - celebrating, is not happening.

   Characteristics of traditions that indicate they may need to be altered or abandoned include:

   *They are minimized or disappear* (for example, adolescents who refuse to participate because they would rather be with their friends).

   *They are interrupted.* This is a signal to you or your family that you are struggling through a crisis like an illness, death, divorce, or migration.

   *They are too rigid.* They are confining, constraining individual development or expression, and unchanging. In these, there is almost no room for anything new or spontaneous to occur. When traditions are rigid, the family attends only to the continuity, trying to remain the same, despite the needs of people to change and grow.
They are obligatory. These are engaged in out of a sense of obligation and not with any sense of meaning. Every aspect of it is more burden than joy.

They are imbalanced. This can occur within a generation (for example, between spouses) or between generations (for example, things done to suit only the children or only the grandparents).

Examine the traditions - If a tradition does not seem meaningful is it because: It no longer expresses your beliefs? It is out-of-date? It is too hurried? It takes too long? It includes some people actively but leaves others as bystanders? It is too inflexible? People are not sufficiently prepared? It costs too much? etc.

Talk about traditions - Are you satisfied with the aspects of your relationships that are being expressed through a particular tradition? Are other people involved satisfied? If not, how might this tradition be altered?

Plan - Aspects that may need attention are the preparation, people, place, participation, and presents.

Families need traditions that adapt to changes and new circumstances. Traditions that both borrow from the past and are reshaped by present relationship needs are a source of strength and stability. Be intentional about your family traditions and rituals so that they support all family members through the various shifts in life.

Source: Family Information Services

**Fun Things To Do With Your Children**

- Make your own holiday cards. Have children make a list of who they should send cards to.

- Adopt a grandparent for the holidays.

- Have a winter food drive to collect canned goods to give to a church and/or community center.

- Plan an afternoon of fun activities like board games, puzzles, and books.

For more information contact the Scotland County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service at 277-2422. Employment and program opportunities are available to all people regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. In addition, North Carolina State University welcomes all persons without regard to sexual orientation.

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