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3 FACT-BASED STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING HOLIDAY GUILT AND STRESS

Dr. Laura Dabney —*the Intimacy MD*

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by Dr. Laura Dabney, the Intimacy MD

Right around this time every year my clients' lives begin to churn with guilt and stress. They tell me about all the extra stuff they "have to" do to get ready for the holidays. They tell me about the family traditions they've already begun to dread. They say they wish they could enjoy the holidays more. Then they chastise themselves as being "bad" people for feeling that way.

Let me say here the same thing I say to each of them: The only way to enjoy the holidays is to **do what fulfills you**. When you start out with a sense of obligation (a "have to"), that leads to guilt which, in turn, leads directly to resentment.

The way to beat what I call this **Obligation-Guilt-Resentment** cycle is by adapting three crucial strategies:

- 1. Accept that there are no "bad" feelings.** It's okay to dislike going to your mother-in-law's house for Thanksgiving every year. It's okay to hate the meatballs that have been a family tradition since before you were born. It's even okay to not enjoy playing host to people you love. The only way to discover happiness is to first discover and acknowledge your other, sometimes uncomfortable feelings. The truth is, feelings don't make us bad; actions do. Feeling so angry at someone that you want to punch them doesn't make you a violent person; actually punching them makes you violent. So, accept the fact that you hate spending \$2500 to fly your family across the country for 3 days in your parents' overcrowded house. That's understandable. It's reasonable. And it's healthy to acknowledge what you don't like so that you can move toward what you do enjoy.
- 2. Take care of yourself first.** There's a reason the airlines tell us to put on our own oxygen masks before helping others. When we're tired or fed up or angry or emotionally exhausted, it becomes difficult (if not impossible) to show care to those around us. Sure, I've had plenty of clients who think they do a good job of hiding their feelings about the holidays, but in nearly every case, they've discovered that their loved ones actually did know they were unhappy. Kids say, "Dad's always a grump at Christmas" or their spouse says, "We have a major fight just after Thanksgiving every year, without fail." If you really don't want to ruin the holidays for those around you, you're going to have to get really good at making sure you take the time to do the stuff that you enjoy.
- 3. It's healthy to say, "No."** Finally, we can't expect to enjoy the holidays by simply admitting to the stuff we don't enjoy and then trying to compensate for that resentment by doing even more. We have to eliminate obligations first in order to make room for the things we enjoy. We need the courage to say, "No" to the things that drive us directly into the path of the Obligation-Guilt-Resentment cycle.

So, what does it really look like to put these three strategies into action? Take “Suzanne” as an example. She and her husband spent every holiday with family, alternating trips each year between Christmas with her family or Thanksgiving with his. They’d always done it this way since the year they were married and it was tradition. But every year, without fail, Suzanne and her husband ended their holiday visits in a serious argument. They always blamed the fight on inconvenient flight schedules or illness or the end-of-year stress at work. But really, Suzanne eventually discovered that she and her husband were both stuck in the Obligation-Guilt-Resentment cycle.

The first step in breaking the cycle was for Suzanne to get comfortable with saying that she didn’t enjoy holidays with her in-laws. She loved spending time with them at other points in the year, but the holidays always felt, she said, “like too many people with too many expectations.”

Suzanne’s second step was to work up the courage to talk with her husband about her feelings. She and I practiced what she would say, that she loved his family but that the travel was hard on her, and would he be open to staying home this year? To her shock, her husband quickly admitted that he hated travelling during the holidays, too. She had no idea that they both were stuck in such a cycle of misery during a time of year they both wanted to enjoy.

The final step came when, together, Suzanne and her husband told his family that they would not be travelling to be with them over the coming Thanksgiving holiday. They did, however, suggest that the family make a point of planning a different vacation together. To their shock, everyone thought that was a great idea. Even more, two of Suzanne’s sisters-in-law emailed her separately to thank her. They had been feeling the same stress but hadn’t known how to address it.

Suzanne’s story is not an outlier. When my clients are honest about their feelings and exercise the courage to care for their own selves, the outcome is almost always as positive as Suzanne’s was. Which means that you, too, can break your own cycle of resentment this year.

I wrote an entire guide about surviving the holidays and you can download it again this year for free. In it, you’ll learn more about the Obligation-Guilt-Resentment cycle, as well as concrete strategies for breaking it. You’ll gain insight into what feelings you, yourself may be avoiding, and you’ll come away with specific tactics for how to discuss your feelings and ideas with your own loved ones.

Download my guide, *There’s no place like home for the holidays. (Yeah, right)* today. And here’s to a stress-free holiday season for each of us.



About Dr. Laura Dabney, the Intimacy MD

Relationship stress is no match for Dr. Dabney. Every week, she works with patients in dozens of cities across the United States, helping them break the patterns of past relationships and beat a path to a happier, healthier future. She owns a leading clinical practice in Virginia Beach and has been Board Certified in Psychiatry. Download her latest articles, read real-life case studies and learn more about her offerings at DrLDabney.com.