Social Dynamics During the Holidays

With Jori Manske

Although most people consider this season a time of celebration, a variety of feelings are stimulated as well as old habitual patterns in relationships. We may be increasing our involvement with our family of origin or our chosen family, or we feel loneliness at the lack of connection. Either way, any sense of separation we feel contrasts to the expectation of the joy and celebration of the holidays. Perhaps we have some ideal about how it "should be" at this time of year, and what is happening is not reflecting that.

We compound our difficulty in maintaining compassion for ourselves and with those we are closest with by how we identify ourselves with them. It is often hardest to hear what they are saying to us as an expression of their experience and for it not to mean anything about who we really are. Thus we are more likely to take responsibility for their feelings, which can lead to guilt, shame, depression, and resentment. These feelings are exacerbated by the habitual pattern we call the "Vortex of Submission" which goes like this:

- We do something without joy or with a hook, perhaps in the hopes of building goodwill. ("Here, let me do that for you !")
- We do not get what we want in return and we feel resentful ("After all I have done for you...")
- We react, saying or doing something we wish we hadn't. (Insert your favorite blame or criticism here!)
- We feel guilt, shame, depression. (I'm sorry!)
- So we do something to make it better, i.e. without joy or with a hook....and so it goes. ("Let me make it up to you....")

We can become aware of the pattern at any point in the cycle, and we can break it by:

1. Don't do anything that isn't fun or that does not have meaning and joy in the moment. (Connect with what your own intention is in the choice you are making.)
2. Ask yourself, "What is this other person saying 'yes' to when I am hearing them saying 'no' to what I want? How can we both get our needs met?"
3. Avoid acting when you feel emotionally upset and are lacking wisdom and perspective.
4. When you feel guilt or shame, stop and give yourself some "emergency first aid empathy": connect to what actually happened and notice what needs of yours are unmet. Then shift your attention and make a guess what the other person is feeling and needing.
5. Notice the habitual pattern. See what needs you are hoping to meet and check if those needs are being met. Explore what other strategies you might try that might better meet your needs.