



5

PRACTICES TO CULTIVATE JOY THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Is it really, truly possible to find joy despite the distance during this time of year? The short answer is -- absolutely. Though, how can we manage to do that? Here are some things to consider if you're about to face this season apart due to a deployment or far-away duty station location.

1. READJUST YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Often, our lives are filled with what seems to be an ever-flowing amount of change. And, some changes come at a moment's notice when you've already done your best not to forecast the future too much.

But, that doesn't mean you've mastered the ability to keep your expectations at an all-time low. No matter how much you try not to contrive an idea of how things will go in your mind, when something doesn't come to fruition exactly as you'd envisioned, it still stings just as much.

So, while society may lead you to have hopes, and the added stress, of carrying out merry family traditions, recreating childhood memories, or getting to savor a video call with your spouse while the kids unwrap their presents, remember that no one has a picture-perfect holiday.

When a curveball is thrown your way, fine tune your plans and know that, while unexpected, this year's holiday is still worth celebrating because it's unfiltered, unique, real, and filled with many extraordinary moments.

2. BE ON THE MOUNTAIN, AND BREATHE IT ALL IN

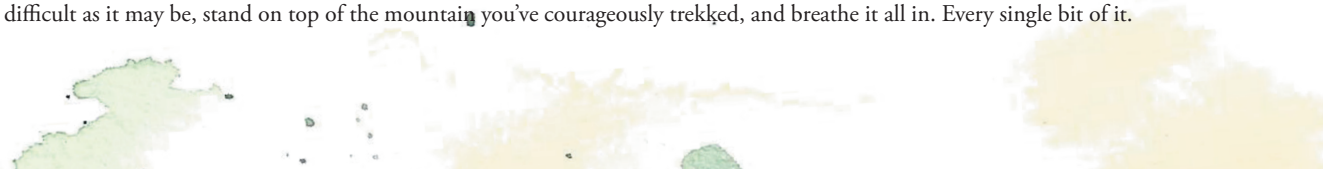
I once had the pleasure of listening to a fellow service member spouse speak at an event, and there was one specific quotable nugget she eloquently shared. Are you ready to hear what it was?

Be on the mountain.

Just a few simple words strung together that made one powerful statement in the hearts and minds of our community. She went on to explain that we live in a constant state of countdown modes -- from homecoming to PCSing, training, and so forth. It makes up a considerable part of our lives, but as a result, it can steal our focus on living in the present.

Maybe you're about to arm yourself with a dose of bravery to venture to your hometown with kids in tow, sans your loved one. But, think of the precious moments you'll get to spend with the immediate family you only get to see every once in a while. Those are moments you can't get back.

Therefore, as difficult as it may be, stand on top of the mountain you've courageously trekked, and breathe it all in. Every single bit of it.



3. FIND BEAUTY IN SIMPLICITY

For far too long, our culture has led us to believe that the best celebrations during this time of year involve more -- more presents, events, decorations, you name it. Thus, if you find yourself being consumed with feelings of dread or anxiety at the mere thought of what you may have to face in the very near future, thwart this kind of consumerist view and decide today to simplify the season.

When it comes to gifting, use the unique skills you were given to make alternative options for friends and family versus fighting the frenzied crowds at the mall. Or, provide experiences versus disposable trinkets.

As for your calendar, become intentional about what you say yes to. Instead of trying to attend every gathering, community function, or church festivity, choose only one per week or weekend, whichever serves your family best.

If you're worried you'll miss out, simply envision the space you're creating for you and your loved ones to immerse in the time you have to spend together, near or far.

4. GIVE THE GIFT OF GENEROSITY TO YOUR COMMUNITY

One thing that helped me while my husband was deployed was reminding myself that I wasn't the only one without. It's easy to feel isolated, especially if your family doesn't quite understand what you're experiencing. But, one way to establish a sense of togetherness and embody the meaning of the season is to spread joy to others within the service member community.

In particular, if you plan to stay at your duty station for the holidays and know you'll be cooking up some comfort foods, extend a dinner invitation to those who are also missing their loved ones. Or, if you're traveling back to your hometown, send your spouse and his or her troop a care package filled with favorite holiday treats and comforts from home. These simple, yet meaningful gestures will allow us to feel closer to one another -- no matter where we may find ourselves.

5. GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is to find freedom from living in servitude to the expectations of others. Far too often, we put an enormous amount of pressure on ourselves to feel or act a certain way. And, it only amplifies during the holiday season.

Therefore, toss the idea of flawlessness out the window. None of us can do and be it all, especially during this time. Not this year. Not right now. Lean into your safety net because your tribe will be there to catch you. And, please do your best to be kind to yourself. Doing so will only help open the doors to finding a balance that allows you to truly revel in every moment you have to love and show your gratitude to the people who make your life wonderfully one-of-a-kind.

Will the holidays be completely and utterly blissful? Not always. There will be beautiful moments and beautifully trying moments. But, conscientiously focus on what will bring you joy and open your heart up to doing so.

As soon as you give yourself permission to make the most of all this season will bring you despite the distance from loved ones, you'll find you surely are strong enough to endure this time apart while cultivating cheer -- with a mug of hot cocoa and plate of warm sugar cookies in hand.

