

How couples can start their own Christmas tradition, no kids required



Some couples prefer to spend holidays alone, and plan alternate celebrations with their families. (Blend Images, Getty)

By Jessica Reynolds,
Chicago Tribune

DECEMBER 1, 2014, 11:01 AM

There's an expectation that once couples have children, they will start their own holiday traditions. Christmas mornings will be spent as a nuclear family, reading aloud the note Santa left next to the plate of cookie crumbs and opening the presents left under the tree. Gift exchanges with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins will be worked into the schedule in the days before or thereafter — or maybe just sometime in the spring.

But for couples without kids, spending holidays on their own is sometimes a harder milestone to reach, at least without a fight.

"The assumption often among family members is that, if you don't have kids, then you have all kinds of free time and nothing else to do," said Amy Blackstone, associate professor and chairwoman of the department of sociology at the University of Maine.

Obviously this is rarely the case, but that belief can lead some relatives to think a couple's holiday plans should revolve around families that do include children.

"(As a society), we're not culturally comfortable with the idea that a family can mean two people," Blackstone said.

But, she added, our culture is catching on to the idea that there are many types of families, some without children.

"Society has convinced us that holidays equate to spending time with every single member of your extended family," said Julie Leventhal, lecturer of educational psychology at the University of North Texas.

While some people enthusiastically await the lavish family gathering, others dread it. And telling family members you want to spend the holidays with your partner — just the two of you — isn't the easiest conversation to have. Feelings will likely be hurt. People might feel snubbed.

Do you both agree?

Another wrinkle, of course, is when couples have different ideas about where and how to spend the holiday. So before you tell your family you're staying home, make sure your partner feels the same way.

It's less about how the couple spends the holidays and more about how they come to that decision, said Luis Congdon, a Seattle-based relationship coach who runs LastingLoveConnection.com. He suggested couples have a frank talk about how well they get along with their respective families — and their partner's. Then they can decide whether they prefer to spend the big day with a particular side of the family — or alone.

"If a couple can make the choice together, it always turns out better. If they force the other (person) to do something unwanted for the holidays, it can wreak havoc," Congdon said.

But sometimes the decision to celebrate alone is made for you. That's what happened to Melissa Chandler, 31, of Louisville, Ky., and her husband one Christmas Eve several years ago. The couple was halfway through a four-hour road trip to visit family when it started to snow.

This was in the South, so the interstate quickly became impassable. The couple had to spend the night in a cheap motel, Chandler said. They found a Chinese restaurant within walking distance and spent the evening in their room eating egg rolls in bed and watching "A Christmas Story," until they fell asleep with the TV on, she recalled.

"What started out seeming like a disaster turned out to be one of our favorite memories," she said. The experience prompted them to start their own tradition of spending the holiday together in their own home. They don't have children, nor do they plan to, but they do have a Labradoodle and a cat that are considered bona fide members of the family.

Chandler said it was hard for her and her husband to explain their decision to their parents, adding that they always felt pressure to please both families and accept every Christmas dinner invitation. But she said that ultimately families on both sides respected, supported and maybe were even a little envious of their decision to celebrate Christmas by themselves.

Find other ways to celebrate

Instead of making up an excuse about why you have to spend Christmas alone, just be honest, Congdon said. Maybe plan another gathering, like a belated Christmas dinner or a New Year's Day brunch, as an alternative to celebrate the season. If long-distance travel is what deters you from wanting to spend Christmas with family, consider planning a Skype session that day instead.

There's no reason to feel guilty about spending Christmas independently of parents, siblings or other relatives, even if you've traditionally celebrated with those people in the past, Blackstone said.

12/1/2014

How couples can start their own Christmas tradition, no kids required - Chicago Tribune

"The idea that (childless) couples don't form families of their own is a myth," Blackstone said. "They, like all families, enjoy and have every right to spend the holidays as a family too."

jreynolds@tribpub.com

Twitter @reynoldsjessica

Copyright © 2014, Chicago Tribune