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Unmerry and not-so-bright:

SURVIVING CHRISTMAS WHEN IT ISN'T JOYFUL

by Leslie Ann Jones

When you saw Christmas decorations in the store six months ago, you began hoping that Jesus would come back before the holiday that celebrates His birth. And when your neighbors started festooning their house with half a million multi-colored lights, you tried to ignore the glow. When people started asking you what you want for Christmas, you had to resist the temptation to tell them what you really want: for Christmas to disappear. It's not that you don't appreciate the reason for the season. It's just that Christmas isn't exactly merry and bright for you this year.

Maybe your parents split up and plan to drag you between their houses for your entire holiday vacation. Or perhaps all the family togetherness that comes with the season simply leaves you craving some time alone, away from the drama that inevitably unfolds when your feuding family gathers in one location.

Maybe your grandmother, who always went out of her way to bake you brownies and make you feel special, just died, and you're dreading a holiday without her infectious warmth.

Or maybe your Christmas spirit has been diminished by your girlfriend who dumped you (in a text message) after you gave her the gift that cost you a month's worth of work

at your part-time, minimum wage job and before she gave you anything.

For one reason or another, you're feeling less than cheerful about the arrival of the holiday season. You're wondering how you're ever going to survive another round of wishing people "Merry Christmas!" when all you really want to do is hide in your room until the holiday is over. It's not easy to face Christmas when it amplifies tense and painful situations, but it's possible to survive the holiday and enjoy it, even when it seems like you'll never make it through. Here are some tips to help you deal with the tough stuff and celebrate Christmas with a spirit of joy.

There's no such thing as perfect.

Your TV screen may be overrun by perfect families celebrating the season at perfect dinner parties held in perfect homes, but remember that



even the most perfect families have issues. Thanks to sin, perfect is an illusion, and dysfunction is the norm. No one enjoys every part of every Christmas, and the good news is that you're not alone in your Christmas-time stress. Even those who seem like they have it all together are struggling with something; they just don't let you see the struggle. You shouldn't throw an "Unmerry Christmas" party or revel in the misery of others, but it's good to remember that you aren't the only one struggling to find joy during the season.

Give yourself some time.

Go to your room, set the alarm for 15 minutes, face your feelings, and be honest with yourself. One of the first steps to recovering joy is admitting that you're unhappy in the first place. You shouldn't feel guilty about being unhappy, but you don't have to let the unhappiness control you. There are

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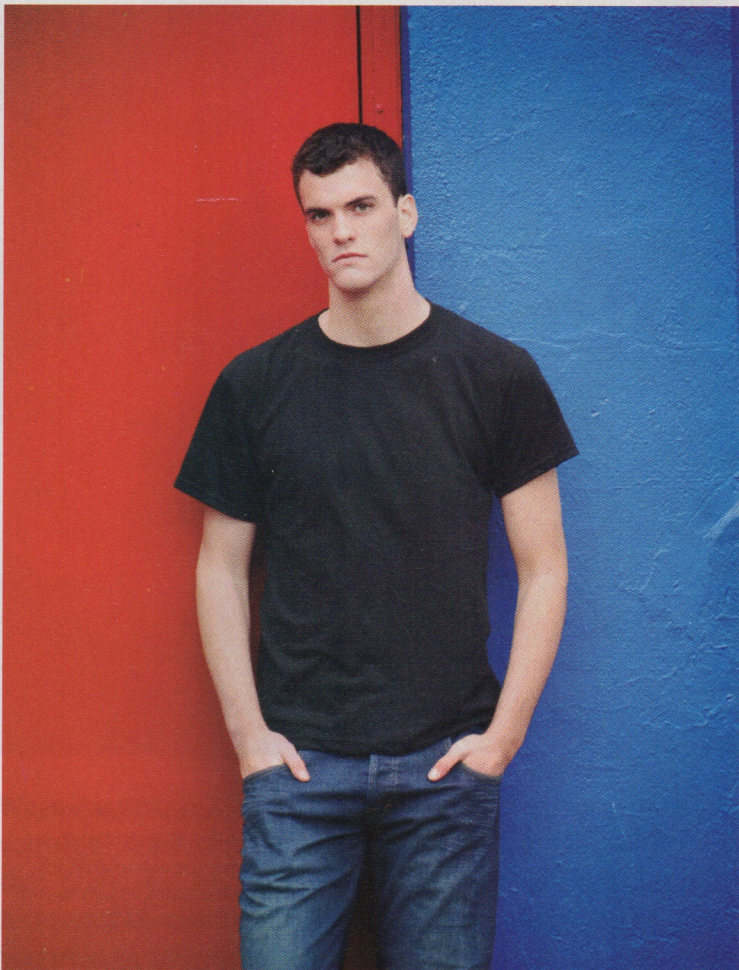
some things, like how you feel, that you can't control, but you're completely capable of choosing how to respond to those feelings.

Pray or write in your journal about what's going on both inside and outside of you. Nothing, even your deepest bitterness, is too much for God to handle, and you'll feel much better once you've dealt with some of your emotions. But don't give yourself

permission to wallow in self-pity for the entire holiday. Remember to set the timer. Once the alarm goes off, take a deep breath and return to your family with a fresh attitude.

Make some lemonade.

The beverage of choice for the season may be hot chocolate, but if Christmas hands you a bushel of lemons, choose to turn it into lemonade. You already know that some parts of the holiday will be difficult for you to handle, so start gathering the ingredients you need to turn the situation around. Sweeten a Christmas Eve spent with your dad and his new girlfriend by intentionally setting aside your differences and playing a rousing game of Monopoly. Lighten up a tense family situation by telling a story or watching a movie that gets everyone laughing. You don't have to let the situation define your mood. If you know a situation is going to be tense



or stressful going into it, you can take steps beforehand to decide how you'll handle it in a way that brings glory to God and doesn't add to the tension. You're in control of the way you react, and you have the power to turn things around. Most situations do not actually warrant hysterics, screaming, or otherwise embarrassing antics. You know stressful situations are a part of your family's holiday celebration. Make up your mind now about how you'll respond when those situations arise. Most of all, pray. Prayer has a way of softening our hearts and helping us to see others through Jesus' eyes.

Spread some cheer.

If you think you're going to murder your stepbrother because he's already broken three of the gifts you opened a few minutes ago, get out of the house!

Go for a run or kick a soccer ball around in the yard. Recognize that one of the best ways to lift your spirits is to lift someone else's. Go caroling. Help serve a hot meal to hungry people at a local food kitchen or a ministry your church sponsors. Pass out gift baskets to the poor. Ring a bell at the mall for a ministry. Fill up a shoebox with goodies for a child. It doesn't matter what you do, just do something to get your mind off

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yourself and onto someone else. It will help you remember how fortunate you really are and restore your Christmas spirit.

Focus on the hope that Christ brings.

Even if Christmas dinner bursts into flames in the oven and your stepdad constantly ignores you, you can choose to rejoice in the hope that Jesus brought into this world when He was born. Your situation, no matter how unbearable, is temporary. Jesus' birth is a promise of new beginnings and a better future in a place that surpasses our wildest expectations. We all long for the day when we'll be reunited with Him, and Christmas is the perfect time to celebrate the return we're anticipating.

Christ came once, and He will come again to rescue us from the most hopeless of situations. If you can capture a glimmer of that hope, hold onto it, cherish it, and remember that the birth of Jesus really does make a difference.

It's reason enough to be joyful. **EC**