



The Accidental **EXISTENTIALIST**

WINTER 2018 / 2019

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KING. ME.

**MANAGING FAMILY:
5 ROLES TO AVOID**

**MIDTERM ELECTIONS 2018:
THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY**

**NAVIGATING THE HOLIDAYS
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The winter sunset looms. The darkness gathers quickly, and the cold winds blow, but there kindles inside us a hopeful side to the long winter months. A flame remains in spite of its obscured existence. So here is my challenge to you, Dear Reader, Stoke the flame.

May you head into the New Year believing you can make it a great year. Most importantly, may you head into 2019 with a plan.

Great things in life seldom happen without resolve, energy and a creative spirit. The good stuff is the result of vision, strategy, hard work, and patience.

There's some truth to what naysayers spout about resolutions, but the concept of resolutions is a good one. Used well and with good intent, they can provide the focus needed to turn goals into that ever elusive "new normal."

We all have answers to what we want out of life. The problem is that we ask ourselves the wrong questions. Instead of asking "How?" or "Why?" try "When?" or "Where?"

Many people who've lost weight were rarely successful on the first or second try. Yet, they persevered.

If a goal is worth dreaming, it's worth relentless effort and passion. Perseverance and resolve are key. Little in life is accomplished without them.

So rather than abandon your New Year's resolutions, add this one: "I resolve to keep my New Year's resolutions."

Create a life worth living. Navigate those uncharted waters and stop being your own worst critic.

Commitment counts. Remind yourself frequently of what you hope to achieve, and pursue it with urgency. Life is indeed short, with no guarantees. When does it start for you?

Have a Healthy and Happy New Year.

Peace,

- don



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**KING.
ME.**



by Derek Malush

Life

is habitually referred to as a game. Numerous pieces, various rules, and the board on which we play is the ground we tread on.

Take chess for example. An intellectual's game, which entails limitless hours of practice to mature one's strategy. I often amused the thought of chess as just being an old person's game. That when you see chess being played, it is, as sappy indie films tell us, usually two older folks trying to out-duel one another using their ripened wit and arduous tactics as if the rusted gates had just dropped down on the beach of Normandy.



As I attempt to make these methodical, yet indecisive maneuvers throughout the game I begin to think to myself, what if the moves I am making aren't strategic enough? What if I keep trying to practice but right before my eyes the chess board becomes a blur of just two conflicting colors? This game has been an unceasing battle that I may never comprehend or grasp the concept of.

This is life, portrayed by a game that has haunted me for ages.

All I know is, I do not want to play this game.
But I need to.

Chess is a game where unlike pieces are intelligently combating on a battlefield to determine who is the canniest, strongest and cleverest of them all.

There are six representations that make up each side of the clashing colored ground. A King, Queen, Bishop, Knight, Rook, and Pawn.



"I could be a King?" I consider to myself.

"I have many friends, a family who loves me and people willing to do whatever it takes to

protect me."

"I could definitely be a King!"

However, a King denotes power, influence and control. Just as a real king would. He serves as the most significant piece to the game and can only move one space at a time.

My hand quivers like the tail of a dog trapped in a lion's cage as I anxiously attempt to lure my King away from his domain on my first move. Only to learn that just the thought of touching something so respected, so valued, on my first move, was utter blasphemy. Not to mention that the King has limited reach and begins the game surrounded and protected on all sides. Critical, yet useless.

Attempting to make a power move this premature indefinitely lies in the shallow pool of rational thought. But what better way to demand authority than using a King to do it?

The end objective for the King is to escort him across the board without being captured. So in essence, the King does none of the work but has the most significance.

We all know that one person who was handed everything in life. Money, material belongings,

a sense of importance or rank. With a wealthy upbringing, one can effortlessly miss the rather large details that make up who they really are. Yet, we mock who they are and gawk at how glamorous their life may be.

All the other pieces to the game, like you and me, serve as the offensive line. Creating a hole just big enough for the King to squeak through to reach the end zone.

Growing up, I played tight-end on my middle school football team. So maybe, I am here to help block for the King instead of trying to be him. However, once your King has been captured, the game is over, and you lose. So I just hope that I can block as well as I envy.



A Queen. So elegant, majestic and royal in presence. One may say she serves as the power behind the throne. Queens were portrayed often as a King's "right-hand man". Someone that just inherited the title because of their significant other. Yet, the Queen is perhaps not as important, but more versatile as the King. She can move any direction she wants, as many spaces as she wants, making her a prominent piece to the game. We all know that a King cannot be so, without his

queen. That without a Queen, a King is weak, feeble and maybe not be as powerful without his influence behind the throne. In chess, the Queen represents herself. And because of the value that the queen possesses, she may sacrifice herself to benefit the greater good.

To be in such a position where you would need to cost yourself your chances of victory so that everyone else can continue playing, takes bravery.

In the summer of 2008, I was a freshman in high school. My brother Trevor and I were playing around with a blue BIC lighter that we had taken from our house. As we strolled down the dampened road, our feet slapping in the rain puddles, we stopped off at the local drug store for some candy. On the walk home, I lit a piece of paper behind a dumpster on fire with the blue lighter. Seeing something burst into flames at the age of 14 was oddly amusing to the both of us.

As the paper quickly scorched away before us, a police officer pulled up as fast as the paper had turned to ash. Fearful of what he was going to say to us, my brother swiped the lighter from my clammy left hand and stored it in his right pocket. When the officer asked us, who lit the fire, Trevor seized the blame for the arson charge that was to come. I could have

simply told the officer that it was me, however, we both would have gotten charged at that point. It wasn't necessarily who he wanted to be, but who he wanted me to become. I could now continue the game without any repercussions, as he awaited his court hearing 3 months down the road. Trevor did it for me. And it didn't matter where it took him, but where it could've taken me was his only worry.

I'm no coward, but I cannot parade my ignorance around for someone who has endured so much distress, agony and sacrifice to achieve who they want to be. It takes resilience and determination to get to where you want to be, and I feel as if I am not worthy of this revered game.

Yet, I continue to play.



I speedily pick up my Bishop and whisk it across the board, praying that I can start the game with such a move. As the Bishop stands proudly next to its King and Queen, it has the power to move forward, backward, diagonally, and has the ability to capture any opposing game piece in its path. However, because a Bishop cannot jump over a game piece to claim its captor, they can only apprehend a piece of the cavalry by

occupying the square on which it lies.

I then think to myself, I cannot just be handed such an honor as I am positioned adjacent to the sacred King and Queen, without knowing how I got there in the first place.

I once copied a student's homework in the third grade. Word for word, as it was a fill-in-the-blank worksheet on Presidents of the United States. As I turned in my worksheet in with the other classmates, the girl I copied off of received a zero on hers because she did not write her name on the top of the page. Resulting in the teacher not knowing who's it was. I received a passing grade for the homework that day and she a failing one. I felt no remorse or guilt in my fake passing grade, however, today, I realize that I was given recognition for something I knew nothing about. My worksheet was plastered on the chalkboard for all to see as it was the only one that had all the correct answers. As I received credit and appreciation for my "work," Stacy was sulking as she asked to use the restroom. When in reality, Stacy was the Bishop and I was just "pawn" scum.

Slowly, I'm beginning to acquire further roles throughout the game.

Moving my Bishop on the first move was unprecedented and ill-natured. Again, my unfamiliarity for the game and its integrity went right out the window like a paper airplane thrown in science class.

Knight

“When can I play and know my role?” I ponder so infinitely.

“Could I be a Knight?”

A Knight illustrates an armored soldier. Someone who will do whatever means necessary to win the war. Therefore, a Knight has slightly more power over the Bishop, only because it can hurdle other pieces in order to safely pave the way for its King.

So how can I expect to exercise my Knight if I am yet to measure up to the likes of a Bishop?

Six years ago, I was told by my doctor that I would be unable to attend college directly out of high school. Wanting to start life after high school is one of the most anticipatory feelings I believe someone can go through. You get to live on your own away from your parents, hang out with friends whenever you want and begin your early stages of adulthood. I wanted nothing

more than to be able to raise my diploma with my closest friends from high school four years later. As my brothers, friends and classmates all had their trunks full with clear plastic bins and disinfectant wipes; I was opening my parents’ fridge to uncap the pre-dosed needle and injecting it into the top of my right shoulder.

I didn’t really understand the specifics of liver disease; I just knew that it was keeping me from my 18-year-old dream of spending the best years of my life with my closest companions.

So no, to the head of the Phi-Delta-Si frat house, these were not the best years of my life. Instead, I scrolled through my social media feed, grimacing at all of the Class of 2016 posts as I angrily smash the “Like” button on a confused rampage.

However, before even starting this chess game I’ve been in for over six years; I have gathered that it takes discipline and a systematic approach to know what it takes to win.

At this point, I don’t even entertain the notion of wanting to play chess anymore. The pieces are not who they say they are and I don’t understand the board that it’s played on.

I’ve learned that a King can sometimes wrong-

fully be given its crown. And that a pawn can sometimes be the hero of a chess game if it reaches the opposite side of the board.

In the end, I have reached the conclusion that maybe I wasn't supposed to be playing chess at all. That maybe I wanted to play so impatiently that I forgot the true nature of how I was going to win or who I wanted to become.

It's odd to feel as if everyone around you is in complete control of every aspect of their existence. That everyone you see or hear is doing that much better than you are. It is tough to compare someone's Chapter 26 with your Chapter 1. In this case, my book was burned at the stake, leaving me to rewrite everything I have already accomplished. My friends were graduating college on time when I was a sophomore. They are buying houses, apartments, cars and starting families when I had an Introduction to Political Science midterm due by 11:59 p.m. Something that I thought was so complex turned out to be rather simple to everyone around me.

Then it hit me.

Like a snowball in January.

"Simple!" I awkwardly murmur to myself.

I come home from class and open up my basement door; walk over to the timeworn, dry-rotted wooden shelving, and pull out the one, simple game I could always understand.

I impatiently tear open the dusty box and dump out the contents. The pieces ring off the concrete floor like change in a deep pocket. I set up the board and its pieces. Turns out the two conflicting colors still portrayed the same ground I gait on. Yet the pieces were quite the contrary. I was confused at first on how I should make my first move; however, I knew exactly how to play. After all, checkers was my bread and butter as a youngster.

All pieces in checkers are equally powerful. There are no status symbols, rank or specific importance to any individual piece. It is not until they've earned their status that a checker can cultivate in power or importance.

Before making my first move, I think to myself, "It's O.K to not know how to do something."

It's even O.K to not know much about anything at all. When we know how to do something, we do it. And when we know how to say something, we say it. Striving for acceptance amongst your peers often leads to the exact imperfection that once haunted us on that first day of high school.

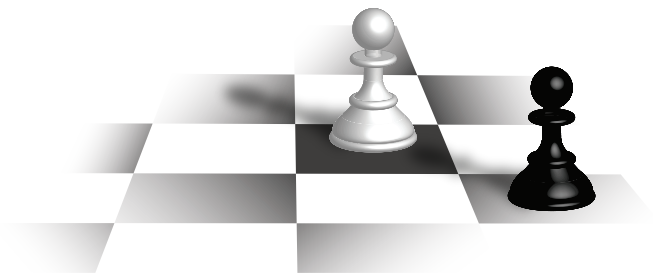
And putting our hearts on our sleeve for a person does not mean we're vulnerable, it simply illustrates the love we currently inherit. We do the things we do, the way we know how, based on how other people see fit. Maybe it's because we are afraid that if we step out of the social norm we will be criticized or judged? If so, I've learned that's O.K.

But there is one thing we do know for sure. And that is who we are. It may take years or maybe even decades to truly find that answer, but every move we make, big or small, is worth any postponement.

Play your game and know how to win. Or you might end up a checker in a chess game, like me.

As I effortlessly attempt to make my first move, my opponent has finally graced me with his presence and I can now begin this journey. I stare it directly into its soul and whisper, "King me."

When you are "Kinged" you don't just double in size, but you do so by carrying another piece with you. ■



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Derek is a college student at Point Park University and serves as a Staff Writer on the school newspaper, "The Globe," while majoring in a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication.

The men's basketball beat writer has a passion for athletics, especially basketball and enjoys interviewing players on and off the floor. He also appreciates writing breaking news, student portfolios and feature stories as well. Derek is currently involved in Point Park's media channels, reporting on local news and sports.

He has covered everything from Bruster's Ice Cream shop openings to buzzer-beater wins for the Pioneers men's basketball team.

When Derek is not interviewing athletes or writing long-form pieces, he enjoys listening to smooth jazz, rooting for his hometown sports teams and playing basketball.

MANAGING FAMILY DURING THE HOLIDAYS: 5 FAMILY ROLES TO AVOID

*by Támara Hill, MS, NCC, CCTP, LPC
Owner at Anchored Child & Family Counseling*



How do you plan to spend the holiday this year? Are you dreading the family gatherings? If so, you are not alone.

Research suggests that the holidays are often a time of intense grief and feelings of loss, existential discomfort (discussed below), revisiting of traumatic experiences, overwhelm with materialism and commercialism, and the dispiriting conversations around the table.

According to the University of California Davis Health center, holiday time is often fraught with challenges related to seasonal depression or time change, increased alcohol use, overeating, lack of sleep, over-scheduling, lack of planning, unrealistic expectations about ourselves, unrealistic fantasies about our families, lack of exercise, and lack of time for oneself. In addition to these things, most people fail to realize that the holidays often come at a time when most people are exhausted from a long year. Feeling burnedout and exhausted compounds the stress of the holiday.

We also cannot forget that just because the calendar says one thing doesn't mean everyone is feeling the "holiday spirit." Think of the stress placed on broken families or first responders, mental health therapists, medical doctors, law enforcement, and others who encounter daily traumatic events and who may be struggling with compassion fatigue.

For many of my clients, the holiday season is a stressful, depressing, and anxiety-provoking time. I treat children, teens, and families who struggle with mood and behavioral problems,

family trauma, sexual abuse, traumatic bonding, and severe mental illness who would rather avoid Thanksgiving, Christmas, and even New Years. Sadly, considering their daily challenges, I can't blame them. My families are all in a state of "existential discomfort." Existential discomfort is a term I developed to describe individuals struggling with thoughts and feelings of intense defeat, discouragement, and helplessness with little to no psychological and emotional clarity. I'm sure a lot of people would admit to feeling this way during the holidays.

So what can you do to manage stress and family this holiday season?

I encourage the avoidance of family members who seek to assign you to negative family roles. Resistance, maturity, and self-awareness can help you avoid these roles. Family roles create a power differential which includes privileges, obligations, and responsibilities. These family roles are what often creates the tension in family gatherings.

Common family roles include:

1

The Lost Child: The lost child is an individual who presents as quiet, shy, and mild-mannered but who hides true emotions. The lost child role is one of internalized emotion(s), sadness, and a desire for closeness but an inability to reach out. This role is often given to younger adult children or the individual characterized as the "loner."

2

Family Scapegoat: The scapegoat is the individual who takes the blame for problems within the family. In fact, the common consensus in the world of psychology suggests that narcissists, sociopaths, and guilt-trippers tend to project on to quiet and unsuspecting family members, causing them to believe they are the real problem.

3

Family Mascot/Joker: The mascot is an individual who hides behind the mask of jokes and constant humor. They have a tendency to plow through negative or hurtful emotions by laughing at anything they can. Dysfunctional families tend to maintain the status quo, especially around holiday time when a false sense of happiness is more socially acceptable.

4

Family Hero: The hero is the daughter who buys everyone gifts and wraps them perfectly. Or the father who buys everyone including the neighbor an expensive gift. Or the grandfather who buys the struggling grandson in college a brand new Lexus. The family hero rescues within the family system and is constantly looked to when something goes wrong. Emergencies, divorces, separations, arguments, financial challenges, etc. are all discussed with the family hero.

5

Parentified Child: Have you ever felt like the real parent to your sibling? The parentified child is one who takes care of and emotionally supports a sibling when the real parent lacks the skills necessary to be a parent. Although some kids are naturally supportive to their parents when it comes to siblings (as I have always been!), the parent is often guilty for allowing a child to take the position of the parent.

What role do you think you play in your family?

It is important during this time of year to stay in the present moment, minimize your exposure to unnecessary stress, avoid conflict, set boundaries, embrace introspection and reflection, engage in self-care and mindfulness, hold tightly to your spiritual and religious values, and remember who you are and have become as an adult.

You don't have to tolerate abusive, intimidating, or humiliating behaviors just to have a holiday. You certainly deserve more than that. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Támara Hill, MS, NCC, CCTP, LPC is a licensed therapist and certified trauma professional specializing in child and adolescent behavioral and mood disorders including psychological and emotional trauma. As an internationally quoted therapist, Támara aims to empower families from various walks of life to gain further knowledge and rediscover authentic living.

Támara holds to one life principle: authenticity. While being interviewed by a #1 ranked national mobile website, she explained: "I've always had a somewhat difficult time referring to myself as an "expert" because I strive to remain modest in all I do. I have found that modesty connects me more authentically to families who are suffering."

While working to help troubled and at risk kids utilize their strengths in the home, school, and community, she became known, internationally, for her passion and dedication to seeing change in their lives.

Learn more at www.anchoredinknowledge.com.

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Midterm Elections 2018:

the **GOOD**, the **BAD** and the **UGLY**

by Morgan Roberts, MSPC

2018 saw a historic midterm election. Though, let us be honest, every election is historic. It shapes our government for years, and possibly generations. I am looking at you, Senate, for confirming known-assault-er Brett Kavanaugh.

However, what we saw was a glimmer of hope, the realities of a rigged system, and you know, white people just being themselves. You are probably reading this, hinting at my personal bias here. If you want Nazi-sympathizing journalism, go over to *The New York Times* or better yet, *Fox News*. Honestly, for me, it is hard to hide my bias and my perspective. I tried that in 2016. I was clear on who I was voting for, but did not feel the need to flaunt it. I called it being respectful of different opinions, aka white and privileged.

Instead, that fateful day in November of 2016 taught me that staying quiet and being politically correct is part of the issue. Had I spoken out and encouraged others to vote would we not have the first racist,

misogynistic, cheating, white supremacist, Islamophobic, transphobic rotting pumpkin for president? Maybe. But I will never know. So, in 2018, I made it clear to anyone who would listen that I was ready to ride the Blue Wave.

So much was at stake. We were in a real life and death situation. I am sure many of you feel I am being hyperbolic. But tell that to Heather Heyer, to Antwon Rose, to the 11 Jewish people murdered in their place of worship on Shabbat, to the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, to the students of Santa Fe High School, to Vickie Lee Jones and Maurice Stallard, to the Syrian refugees barred from this country. It is life or death. It has always been. But the gravity of the situation is more glaring now for more people.

While many did *#VoteBlue* in this election, there was also a system built upon racism that reared its ugly head during the election. On November 6, 2018, there

was good, there was some bad, and there was quite a bit of ugly. So, here is your midterm election breakdown.

THE GOOD

We saw a record number of women, AND WOMEN OF COLOR, win across the country. 100+ women are going to Congress. The most in history.

Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar became the first Muslim women elected to Congress. Tlaib, the daughter of Palestinian immigrants, will be representing Michigan's 13th district. Omar, now a representative of Minnesota's 5th district, came to America as a girl from civil war-torn Somalia. Both women ran on progressive platforms such as \$15 minimum wage and immigration reform.

Then, we saw two Native American women elected to the House of Representatives. Deb Haaland of New Mexico's 1st district ran with first-hand knowledge of the general population's struggle. At 57, the member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe is still paying off her student loans, and has previously benefited from SNAP (food stamps).

Joining her in the house is Sharice Davids from Kansas's 3rd district. She is a member of the Ho-Chuk Nation and also makes history as the first LGBT representative in Kansas, thus also making her the first openly LGBT woman of color in Congress. Talk about intersectionality! In case she is not already cool enough, Davids is also an MMA fighter. I would have loved to see her and Paul Ryan duke it out.

New York's 14th district is now represented by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who is now the youngest person ever elected to Congress. During her primary, she was an upset win over 20-time incumbent Joe Crowley, which has been described as the biggest upset victory in the 2018 midterm season.

Ayanna Pressley became Massachusetts' first black congresswoman. She also beat out a longtime incumbent, Michael Capuano. During the primary, Pressley noted how her experiences as a black woman have shaped her worldviews to be quite different to Capuano. People in Massachusetts' 7th district clearly thought her views were better.

The most exciting news for me, personally, is that my home state of Colorado elected Jared Polis as the first openly gay male governor in the United States. Polis was the former representative of Colorado's 2nd district, and made history in 2011 when he and his partner, Marlon Reis, welcomed their first child, making Polis the first gay parent in Congress.

Additionally in the Colorado front, Mike Coffman lost his bid for re-election to Jason Crow, who will now be representing Colorado's 6th district. While Coffman is a critic of the Republican in the White House, he was a birther conspiracy theorist while Barack Obama was in office.

Closer to home, Conor Lamb won his re-election against another incumbent, Keith Rothfus, to represent the newly drawn 17th congressional district in Pennsylvania.

In Texas, two Latina congresswomen were elected to the House, the first for the state. Veronica Escobar, a former El Paso County Judge, will be representing Texas's 16th district while Sylvia Garcia, a state senator, will represent Texas's 6th district.

In the U.S. territory of Guam, the people elected their first woman governor. Lou Leon Guerrero, a former nurse and business woman, Guerrero told the Guam Daily Post, *"I feel very honored that I am the governor-elect, the first female governor elect. I think [it] is a great honor for women. We've made history today – good history today – and plus a 10-female majority in the legis-*

lature. That is phenomenal."

Additionally, with the change in representation, the swamp-land of despair and racism Florida, surprised us in one avenue. Amendment 4, which aimed to reinstate the voting rights of 1.4 million ex-felon, passed. This will completely change the political landscape in Florida for future elections, as the previous law prohibiting all ex-felons from voting, disproportionately disenfranchised black people. Weird, right?

THE BAD

There was bad. You know, polling places where the constituents were predominantly people of color had numerous issues. Not enough electronic polls, not enough ballots, and there were even reports of some places not even having power cords. Power cords!

Then, there is the fact that while the Democrats gained control of the House, Republicans still have control of the Senate. So, that they can, you know, continue to appoint judges who like beer and assault woman.

That's the bad though. The rest of it is so much worse.

THE UGLY

Stacey Abrams, who was running against Republican Brian Kemp, refuses to concede Georgia's governorship to him. But, this is an uphill battle. Kemp is currently Georgia's Secretary of State, who, as part of his job oversees elections, INCLUDING THE GOVERNOR'S RACE. Strange how that works. And instead of recusing himself, he helped purge "inactive" voter records which happened to primarily be black people. Again, weird how that just happens.

But Georgia is not the only blatantly racist state. North Dakota's Supreme Court upheld strict voter ID laws which significantly disenfranchised Native American communities, particularly those living on reservations. Who know those places? The white U.S. government took land from the native people but then "*gave them*"

these reservations. The voter ID law helped Kevin Cramer beat Democratic incumbent Heidi Heitkamp for Senate.

In America's least favorite step-child state Florida, Democrat Andrew Gillum barely lost his race to Republican Ron DeSantis, who, you know, told people not to "*monkey this up*" in regards to voting for his BLACK opponent. You might think I am kidding, but I assure you, I am not. During a debate, Gillum pointed out that while he does not think DeSantis is a racist, DeSantis really wants the racists to think he is a racist. And apparently, the racists won.

Steve King, not the fantastic writer but the neo-Nazi, won his re-election in Iowa which proves that Iowa is clearly not good enough to be the first Caucus in the nation come presidential election time. You lose that right to be first in anything when you continue to vote for a white supremacist.

Then, we have to look at the gerrymandering. What's that, you say? Well, gerrymandering is the redrawing of districts to disproportionately favor one party over another. It is the only way Republicans keep winning. Just look at the Senate races.

Democrats received over 36 million votes, but still only had 41 Dems elected, while the Republicans has barely over 29 million votes, winning 51 seats. I am not great at math, but even this math does not look right to me. If more people are voting for representation from one party, how is the other in power? The simple answer. Cheating. The longer answer. Gerrymandering. Okay, who am I kidding. That is still cheating.

Beto O'Rourke lost his bid for Senate against America's overall least favorite step-child and Zodiac Killer, Republican Ted Cruz. And how could O'Rourke lose to that container of spoiled sour cream? WHITE PEOPLE. That is right. White people. Primarily white women.

Listen up, fellow white women, what in the actual %#@! are you doing?! How are you still voting for people who want to take away your rights? Who do not believe you when you are sexually assaulted? Who want to take away all of your body autonomy? We have got to do better. We have got to be better than our white privilege. It literally only takes us so far. Then, our gender identity steps in and the men in Congress aim to squash us, control us. They want you to feel comfortably white as they take away every other right you have. Stop being stupid. Stop being ignorant. And for God's sake, stop being so racist.

IN THE END...

Since President Voldemort's election, I have personally felt I have aged exponentially. We have seen white supremacists and neo-Nazis emboldened enough to show their faces in the light of day. We victim-blame and victim-shame assault survivors because some white guy wants to become a Supreme Court justice. We have allowed children to be caged. We have let young black men to continue to die with no one being held responsible. Anti-Semitism continues to grow.

There was quite a bit of good to come out of the midterm election. There were people who won despite all odds, and again, gerrymandering. But there is still so much work that needs to be done. It is glaringly awful how much we continue to let racism and prejudices influence our elections. I am tired. And I am a white woman. Just imagine how tired your Jewish friends, your Muslim friends, your friends of color, your disabled friends, your LGBTQ friends, your immigrant friends, your DREAMer friends must be. Show them you care. And keep showing them that you care at the ballot box. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Morgan Roberts is currently an Associate Director at Lifespan, Inc. She supervises an amazing team of social workers who go out into the homes of seniors to provide services and assist them in the community.

Roberts holds a B.S. in Psychology from Fort Hays State University (Hays, KS) and an M.S. in Professional Counseling from Carlow University (Pittsburgh, PA). During her time in Kansas, she worked with social advocacy organizations on campus. She surrounded herself with the coolest, passionate people. Moving to Pittsburgh for graduate school, Roberts continued her fiery feminism. It helps that Pittsburgh is a city of bridges and not walls. One of her life highlights was attending the Women's Marches in 2017 and 2018. Ladies are awesome. Ladies are powerful. And intersectional feminism is the only way we can succeed.

In her spare time, Roberts loves watching films, reading, playing her guitar, listening to true crime podcasts, and eating pizza. Headshot was taken by my amazing friend, and even more amazing photographer, Brandon Penny.



NAVIGATING THE HOLIDAYS & ASSOCIATED EMOTIONS WITH AWARENESS

by Mandi C. Dalicandro-Turk, MSPC

During the holiday season, images of a crisp snow covered lane, with the view into the frost-ed window of a warm and cozy home, the scene of a blazing fire, a long decorative table filled with scrumptious holiday delights, and loved one's surrounding the table brings feelings of dissonance for many. The holidays absolutely have the potential to bring feelings of intimate experiences filled with belonging, exhilaration, sharing, and gathering with loved ones. For many, however, there are increases in stress, anxiety, depression, feelings of loneliness, difficulties with grieving and loss, conflict, and contemplation.

There is meaning to the ornaments being unboxed, the candles lit, and the years, many times, decades of tradition. There are customs leading up to the season, feelings of anticipation, significance to the day(s) of celebration, and the letdown after everything is put away.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES EXASPERATED

During the holidays, mental health, behavioral health, medical issues, and autoimmune issues that individuals grapple with each day have the potential to become exasperated and contribute to increased symptoms, stress, and feelings of exhaustion. For many, it's extremely difficult to

navigate through increases in symptoms and difficulties with coping. Many times, individuals' cope with negative coping mechanisms (i.e., alcohol, unhealthy eating habits, lowered self-care, and/or misuse of medications).

Consider individuals grappling with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), "Twelve month prevalence of GAD is .9% among adolescents and 2.9% among adults in the general community of the United States" (American Psychiatric Association, p. 223, 2013). Individuals have the potential to experience symptom increases (i.e., difficulty concentrating, irritability, difficulties controlling worry, levels of fatigue, muscle tension, and issues with sleep), which complicates discomfort and difficulty in managing symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, p. 222, 2013).

Additionally, individuals contending with Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) grapple with an array of symptoms (i.e., fear of negative evaluation, being humiliated, and/or rejected), many times, avoiding social situations (American Psychiatric Association, p. 202, 2013). During the holidays, it's difficult to avoid all social situations and associated symptom increases.

Furthermore, consider the significant impact and issues with functioning associated with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), "Twelve month prevalence of major depressive disorder is approximately 7%, with marked differences by age group" (American Psychiatric Association, p. 165, 2013). Symptom increases (i.e., feelings of sad-

ness, hopelessness, minimal interest and pleasure, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, diminished concentration, and issues with sleep) complicate already difficult daily functioning and increase the probability of grappling with each facet of holiday obligation and interactions.

Conceptualize the experience of comorbidity of GAD, SAD, and/or MDD with or without substance use (and/or any mental health diagnosis) and its associated symptoms, with the presence of holiday stress, pressures, and the impact physiologically and psychologically. It's best to seek out therapy prior to the holidays to develop positive coping strategies, realistic expectations, awareness to pressures, work through increases in symptoms, and to decrease the probability of underlying issues being triggered.

ENGAGING AND BALANCING CONFLICT — DIFFERING VIEWS VS. DIFFERING VALUES

Some families benefit from closeness and healthy working dynamics. However, even when this is present in the environment, there is potential for conflict and tension during high pressure and high stress times; including desirable ones during the holidays.

Inevitably, there will be internal triggers experienced when engaging with others, which has potential to feel agonizing. In this environment, develop awareness to balance what degree of engagement feels healthier. At times, lighter conversations will assist in minimizing triggers. In the event, stress and discomfort become too over-

whelming to engage, take a few moments to walk outside for some air. Take a few deep breaths and allow the increases in oxygen to balance parasympathetic response, and increase oxygen to the brain to assist with feelings of relaxation, (Wolford, p. 2, 2015). Furthermore, spend time with younger family members; if this is enjoyable. Children and adolescents have potential to bring a different perspective and magic to the holiday, which increases fun and increases relaxation.

Additionally, avoid family conflict. There are two primary areas of focus. First, refrain from engagement, debate, and argument regarding issues of contention between family members and/or friends in general, and where estrangement is present. At times, there may be pressure to choose sides. There is psychological benefit in refraining from choosing sides, treating each person with respect, and engaging with each person individually, if necessary. Reflect prior to being in the shared environment on personal values and feelings regarding the dynamics surrounding conflict. The cognitive process of reflection has potential to increase levels of confidence to support disengagement in the conflict, while dually engaging with others in regards to the positive aspects of relationships and holiday gatherings. This will lower stress, and minimize increases in mental health symptoms.

Lastly, it's reasonable to have different views; it's a driving factor of being human. Many times, human's enjoy debating these views. There is a level of cognitive stimulation, fun, and strategy

involved. With this being said, individuals must consider individual motivations, and how each message is given and received. There are distinct differences in the motivations of debating in positive banter with loved one's out of pleasure, mutual understanding, and respect, even with the presence of opposing views and/or a heated discussion. Equally, it's beneficial to refrain from debating in negative, critical manners with a family member and/or friend of differing values where high tensions are present. During holiday gatherings, consider each individual relationship, underlying motivations, and feelings. When tensions are high and values are vastly opposing, different views have opportunity to be debated at another time. In this situation, it's best to refrain during holiday gatherings. However, in a cohesive and healthy environment, enjoy the banter. Individuals possess varying levels of impulse control. Develop awareness of strengths in impulse control, areas of grappling, and the resulting behaviors of each; then, gauge the best course of action accordingly. In each interaction, engage with respect and graciousness.

LONELINESS, ISOLATION, GRIEF, AND CHANGE

At times, there are shifts in family, friends, supports, and a sense of community. Death, illness, and/or divorce are difficult to navigate through in daily life, and exhausting during the holidays. New traditions that have yet to be created and resistance to shifts in traditions that are no longer possible are common. For divorced partners with children, there are the adjustments for each in regards to splitting time. In the most ami-

cable situations where partners remain respectful and possibly friendly, difficulties, stress, grief, and negative feelings have potential to arise during the holidays. Negotiating for wellness of each individual involved is imperative to maintaining balance and decreasing the probability of future issues.

The loss and associated grieving of a deceased loved one is an excruciating and extensive process. Many times, significant changes to meaningful traditions are a painful reality. Developing awareness that grief will resurface intermittently, many times over, and during meaningful interactions is imperative. Finding ways to honor the deceased loved one will assist with holding on to the meaning of significant traditions, and decrease feelings of isolation and loneliness; including traditions that will inevitably change over time. Grieving is an individual process, the time frame varies from person to person, and is based on the significance of the relationship. It is vital to develop self-compassion and to seek out supports.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Start with being honest about limits physically, mentally, and emotionally. When there are children in the home, balance spending time with children, and with family and friends. Schedule visits on days close to the holiday celebration instead of over committing in one day. This will increase enjoyment of holiday events and decrease feelings of obligation, and potentially, resentment. Additionally, the gatherings may

become a tradition and special day to look forward to for each individual involved.

REFLECT HONESTLY

Many times, thoughts, feelings, and ruminations in regards to family dynamics, divorce, death, estranged relationships, and the focus of seemingly endless obligations increase stress, anxiety, and/or depressive symptoms. It becomes overwhelming for individuals and difficult to balance. Most times, it is beneficial to ask for help, which has the potential to reduce stress and increases the capacities to function well throughout the holidays.

Having awareness that there will be stress assists in setting realistic expectations. Many times, a few simple changes will allow flexibility, while dually honoring traditions (i.e., cooking the meal in advance, offering for each person to choose a dish to bring, setting boundaries to time spent at each gathering, and/or planning finances and budgets a year or more prior). At times, the more an individual attempts to take on without assistance or planning, the more emotional and psychological difficulties are experienced, creating an exasperation of mental health, behavior health, and/or medical issues.

BALANCING OBLIGATIONS AND DESIRABLE ENGAGEMENTS

Balance obligations and spending time with loved ones; especially, loved ones with a significant role in life. Plan each day by writing each event, commitment, obligation, and list of items needing completed in a planner. While doing this,

implement a block of free time to decompress, and to balance unexpected shifts and obligations along the way. Each will reduce stress and assist in balancing emotions, energy, and mental health. Consider taking vacation and/or personal days if they are available and will not contribute to more stress at another time of the year. Doing so will allow for balancing commitments, downtime, and increase the opportunity to decompress after the holiday.

Continue nutritional habits (refrain from inflammation supporting foods), regular exercise, activities, and incorporating healthy sleep cycles. For long trips, bring snacks and water. In addition, when offered to stay with family and/or friends, consider personal comfort. For example, if one partner feels uncomfortable due to personalities, temperament, family dynamics, and/or if children get tired and need rest, consider staying at a hotel for the night. Make it fun for the family and have awareness of individual feelings, thought processes, and how daily function is potentially impacted. When setting boundaries, be kind, gracious, and genuine. Avoid using children as an excuse - be accountable for individual feelings, emotions, comfort, values, setting boundaries, avoiding "the shoulds," and saying no when necessary.

WHEN THE ORNAMENTS ARE BOXED

After the ornaments are put away, and daily life moves forward, it's important to consider what to do with unprocessed feelings and emotions, and the grief and loss of the passing season. Begin to navigate the cognitive steps towards healing by

seeking out the support of family, friends, community, and a therapeutic relationship. Focusing on gratitude (what is present over what is void), resuming daily activities, and seeking out strong supports assists with this process greatly.

In conclusion, the holidays are layered with complex emotions and meaning; simultaneously filled with the potential to grapple with increased symptoms of mental health and medical issues, stress, loneliness, and the innate desire to connect, share, give, and experience intimate feelings of belonging. Consider the benefits to being mindful that each person's life experiences, environment, genetic predisposition, personality, temperament, supports, family and friends, and dynamics are different. Ultimately, develop awareness and engage realistically regarding the pleasures and difficulties associated with the holidays - allow for positive interactions to happen organically towards a more genuine and enjoyable experience. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mandi C. Dalicandro-Turk is a professional counselor who works with a variety of populations including adult, geriatric, and adolescent populations. She is an adjunct professor who teaches organizational psychology, research methods, human development, leadership, motivation, and stress. She also volunteers for a Stress Management Team that assists public safety personnel after the experience of a critical incident. Dalicandro-Turk earned her Bachelor's degree in Psychology summa cum laude and Master's degree in Professional Counseling from Carlow University. She is passionate about assisting others and feels strongly that human-beings benefit from the experiences of learning, growing, and developing throughout each stage of life.

Dalicandro-Turk writes about a variety of topics related to mental health, behavioral health, relationships, stress, anxiety, aging, grieving, self-care, therapy, and improving one's overall quality of life. Read her blog *Everyday Therapy* at:

<https://etalktherapy.com/category/everyday-therapy>

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PUBLISHER

Don Laird

EDITORS

Don Laird / Pilar Brown

CONTRIBUTORS

Derek Malush

Támara Hill, MS, NCC, CCTP, LPC

Morgan Roberts, MSPC

Mandi C. Dalicandro-Turk, MSPC

PHOTOGRAPHY

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CONTACT

www.eTalkTherapy.com/contact

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