



“HOME” FOR THE HOLIDAYS (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2004)

Tian Dayton, Ph.D., TEP

Swirling around, the mind and body of the ACOA contemplating holidays can be a potent cocktail of conflicting memories and feelings. This may be true to some extent for anyone, but ACOAs may find themselves entering the season warding off intruding memories from chaotic or painful holiday scenes from the past that vibrate just beneath the surface of their present. The adult in them knows that they are in charge of their lives today, but the child in them can feel vulnerable and anxious all over again. Why is this, why won't the past just stay neatly tucked away?

Our bodies don't really distinguish between physical danger and emotional stress. The natural fear response associated with our fight/flight apparatus will cause the body to react to physical or emotional “crisis” by pumping out sufficient quantities of “stress” chemicals, like adrenaline, to get our hearts pumping, muscles tightening and breath shortening, in preparation for a fast exit or a fight.

But for those where the family itself has become the proverbial “saber toothed tiger,” such as children in an addicted family system who cannot fight or flee, these chemicals boil up inside and may cause physical and emotional problems. Fight/flight/freeze survival responses are evolution's canny method of keeping us out of harm's way and away from danger. (van der Kolk 1987).

But when it is our family that is causing the stress, our survival apparatus gets all mixed up, and our limbic system, i.e. the body's emotional system, may become deregulated, wired for high alert, stuck on code red, perceiving danger even when there isn't any. Children growing up in these families may have found themselves in a confusing and painful bind, i.e., wanting to flee from or attack those very people who represent home and hearth. The lack of ability to get away is part of what contributes to developing PTSD or long term traumatic symptoms (van der Kolk 1987). Children who grow up with addiction are generally not in a position to leave their homes.

In addition, little children lack the brain development to distinguish as to level of danger (this part of the brain, the hippocampus isn't on board till age

four or five) and the prefrontal cortex, where all our reasoning, thinking and planning takes place isn't fully in place till eleven or twelve. Except the amygdala, which is where our fight/flight apparatus is centered, is fully functional at birth. So a baby is capable of a full blown trauma response, but not capable of regulating or making sense of what is happening around her.

This means that, when the growing child gets scared or riled up, she is basically dependent on the adults that surround her to make the world feel like a safe place, to soothe her back into a state of calm. She doesn't have the brain capacity to use her reasoning to regulate her emotions (Aram 2004). She tries to make sense of the situation with the developmental equipment available to her at the time. Later in life, when she finds herself in circumstances that trigger old memories from the past, she may feel anxious and confused all over again. Much of this triggering is unconscious and impacts our thinking, feeling and behavior without our awareness.

Because the limbic system governs such fundamental functions as mood, emotional tone, appetite and sleep cycles, when it becomes deregulated it affects us in far ranging ways. Problems in regulating our internal states can manifest as an impaired ability to modulate levels of fear, anger and sadness, and may lead to chronic anxiety or depression. Or, it can emerge as substance or behavioral disorders, for example, problems in regulating alcohol, eating, sexual or spending habits.