

Managing boundaries or no contact during the holidays.

Week of 11/20/23 Journal Prompts

My first Thanksgiving after going no contact was the hardest.

It was an abrupt leaving toxic dynamics and then trying to manage the feelings of free-floating out in the world without being connected to family. I invited a friend over and cooked my first turkey solo. It was tough but good enough.

There is often a paradox in either being connected to family or withdrawing from them. The paradox in my experience involves the same feelings regardless of whether I engaged or withdrew.

We typically find ourselves invisible and misunderstood in a toxic family despite our choices.

Whether we stay, go, or engage superficially, it's all lonely. While this is difficult to manage, the good news is that it tells us we don't have much to lose by practicing boundaries or going no contact.

While the feelings of being invisible and misunderstood are the same, the benefits of boundaries or going no contact are autonomy and empowerment. We become empowered when we decide to withdraw and not subscribe to the family narrative behaviors, avoid real issues, or fight with them to get them to change or see us. We drop the tug-of-war rope with them, knowing we have other choices and another path.

To clarify, everyone has a different status with their family at other times in their healing.

*No contact – a conscious decision to leave the system to get space to heal or get safety. (This can sometimes not be a choice but rather a status like with a highly estranged or fragmented family system)

*Boundaries – setting clear boundaries about behaviors, what can be discussed, or how much time is given to being connected. I also call this withdrawing or engaging superficially (a little like grey rocking where you're there but don't engage in drama or old relationship dynamics with parents or siblings.)

*TBD – to be determined. TBD is somewhat like, you know the family is off or not safe, but you're not clear about what to do about it yet. This is also part of the process of becoming empowered but an earlier step.

However, some common inner child feelings and issues come with the hard work of boundaries or if you're in a no-contact status.

Common issues **our inner child** struggles with the toxic family during this time of year:

- Feeling guilty about withdrawing or going no contact – *“Am I bad or making this about myself?”*
- Feeling disconnected and forgotten despite us withdrawing or leaving. *“Do they even care about me?”* (we might secretly wish for the family to try despite withdrawing)
- Feeling powerless when the family disregards boundaries or your preferences. (Try to get you to submit, change your mind, or feel bad about yourself.)
- Feeling grief while watching others celebrate in their families or with loved ones.
- Feeling overwhelmed or underwhelmed about making plans.
- Feeling dread of family gatherings and dynamics.

If you are withdrawing or engaging with more boundaries or minimally, the following journal prompts can help you reparent and feel more grounded and satisfied with your choices and situation.

Journal Prompt #1

What led you to withdraw, set boundaries, go no contact, or awaken to how bad things are? In other words, what got you here now with your family with the holidays approaching? Keeping last-straw events or dynamics in mind is highly beneficial as the inner child has a built-in forgetter. The prompt isn't about cultivating resentment – it's about not losing sight of what is unsafe.

Examples

- *How my mother treated my daughter when she left the garden hose last summer in the backyard and lost it on her – never again!*
- *When we traveled to visit my parents last Christmas, I had a panic attack because it was so bad when they started a fight with my husband over nothing.*
- *Just as my father only calls when he is in trouble – I was going through a terrible breakup, and he didn't even ask about it. He only wanted help with how to deal with my stepmother, who hates me.*
- *I just can't take another moment of all the drinking and how no one is real about the alcoholism and fakeness. I can't sign off on it anymore and pretend I'm okay with it.*
- *It was no big event; my family just stopped talking to each other ten years ago. My mother just gave up. I've realized she never wanted the job.*

- *Two years ago, when I confronted my dad about not listening to me about the family sexual perpetrator, he just said why haven't I let it go yet?*

Journal Prompt #2

What does your inner child struggle with around the status of your family? This can be anything from feeling extreme guilt to dreading an event or just feeling sad there isn't a connective celebration during the holiday.

*Check on the Reparenting the Inner Child course for instruction on how to dialogue with the inner child.

It is more powerful to ask your inner child what they feel on paper in dialoguing rather than think about it in a journaling exercise.

Journal Prompt #3

Once you have a sense of what the inner child struggles with, validate what they are feeling and remind them you are taking steps to keep them safe. It might be worthwhile to spell out what isn't safe in the family.

Examples

- It isn't safe to go to a family event only to be made fun of passive-aggressively and then be attacked when we have a response to the teasing.
- It isn't safe or fun to be around people who are just coping their feelings away with alcohol.
- It isn't safe being around people who refuse to address issues or elephants in the room isn't safe. It's not real intimacy to be with family when huge problems are unaddressed.
- It isn't safe to see others be treated terribly who are okay with it.
- It isn't safe to share a meal with someone who fundamentally denies our truth, choices, and path in life.

Journal Prompt #4

How to make the holidays your own and to celebrate your choices. If you are in a place of dreading the holidays or not making plans due to emotional pain, try to find your inner adult and ask what your inner child might like instead of being with family. If you are seeing family, you can still carve out power and preference. Think of this prompt as a practice of good enough.

Examples

- It's good enough to stay in a hotel to get space instead of with family.
- It's good enough to have a special meal with the chosen family.
- It's good enough to dedicate the day to your inner child and celebrate anyway with something special (a favorite food of theirs).

- It's good enough to go to a family event and not engage in the usual ways (like people pleasing). Please take it as an opportunity to be aware of the triggers instead of swimming in them.
- It's good enough to limit time with family if engaging to cut down on the recovery time it will take (emotional hangovers)

Journal Prompt #5

Often, the best way to deal with the holidays is to make an action plan or decision about how to spend them. Rather than dread, postpone, or obsess, take some time and write out how you would like to wrap up your year, given the state of your family system. Then, take concrete steps to make it happen.

Examples

If you want a meal with friends, but your inner child assumes they will have their own things going on, ask anyway.

Set up a Zoom (despite being sick of Zoom) and share some time with other family refugees.

Plan with your partner ahead of time about limiting time or getting personal space where duties and responsibilities don't just take up the holiday.

If you're going solo, get your favorite food, games, books, and a walk planned out – even if it seems pedantic.

Inner children are often comforted in structure.