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## Connecting to families and friends who live far away

**When you're separated from family and friends, holidays can be especially bittersweet. Some ways to reach out — all year long.**

By Richard Asa, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Americans move a lot: About 45 million did in 2010. That's as if nearly everyone in Spain moved in one year. advertisement

Of the people who moved, 6.7 million had lived in a different state the year before, the Census Bureau reports. The point, in one important context, is that millions of people every year have to cope with separation from their families, friends, communities and traditions.

The holiday season's outpouring of sentimentality, real or manufactured by made-for-TV movies and commercials, can make the distance even harder to bear.

Laura Hedgecock and her family lived in Germany for a time, and she still carries a sad, vivid memory of their first Thanksgiving away from their Spartanburg, N.C., home. It was exacerbated by a trans-Atlantic phone call from her husband's aunt in which she remarked that everyone in the extended family was there but them.

"We tried traveling during the holidays to distract ourselves, but the true solution was finding other expats to share holidays," she says. She and her family now live in the metro Detroit area but are still isolated because relatives are scattered across the country. So, she and her husband and two sons have teamed up with other families to celebrate a Thanksgiving "afterglow" party that features leftovers from various separate dinners.

"These have made us realize that with close friends, family isn't really that far away after all," she says. "It can be hard to reach out. A church family has helped us. When you know someone is in a similar situation, don't wait for the holidays to make an overture. Suggest a cup of coffee or a dinner out."

"When you live far from family, it is your responsibility to create a new family with friends," says Dr. Tim Jordan, a developmental/behavioral pediatrician in Phoenix. "(As with) flowers in your garden, remember that it takes continuous feeding of these relationships to keep them growing."

Lisa Bahar, a marriage and family therapist with offices in Newport Beach and Laguna Niguel, Calif., adds, however, that not everyone finds direct, proactive social interaction with new people comfortable. For some, it causes great anxiety. For them, connecting through shared interests such as children, pets, art and music and an array of community events does not require direct contact yet still creates connection and serves as a

reminder that they are not alone.

Maripat Abbott, an executive relocation expert, suggests that a move far from family and longtime friends can be a softer landing emotionally if the movers take steps beforehand to create community where they are heading.

"We have childbirth classes for pregnancy, outsource agencies for those who have lost their job, but nothing that helps with the interior landscape of a family in relocation," says Abbott, founder of Holistic Relo in Barrington, Ill.

When families do their homework in advance, Abbott says, they can find book clubs, many volunteer opportunities, health clubs, even jobs that create a connection to their new area as soon as possible. She also suggests that a move is a serendipitous time to work on cementing family relationships by scheduling time to process how each member of the family is coping with the transition. Kids, in particular, may project their feelings of sadness and anger over the move onto unrelated incidents if they are not given the chance to share their feelings with their parents. The resulting chaos and unrest in the new home will put up obstacles that slow the assimilation into a new community and the creation of a new "family," Abbott says.

Of course, while you form a new "family" wherever you relocate, your blood relatives and family of friends remain where you left them, and the ties that bind span the miles. Most of the time those connections are little things that form the core of a life story one event and one memory at a time.

You can talk about those somewhat intimately thanks to Skype and communicate through the multimedia Facebook platform. Jordan, who believes that communication technology has tended to water down deep connections in favor of convenience, nonetheless says that for those separated from family during the holidays or any other time of the year, sending fresh photos or videos and Skyping can help maintain an in-the-moment connection that otherwise might just pass you by. Even if you plan to spend Christmas with your family, little Andrew's grandparents will appreciate watching his visit to Santa or seeing Caitlin perform at her school's Christmas pageant.

Kissing a screen is, well, kissing a screen, but it makes the point.

Kevin Strauss, the founder of FamilyeJournal.com, a website designed to strengthen family ties, says "life is all about human connection. That's where happiness is. We've lost that around the holidays because it has become an obligatory event.

"We've also lost it because the holidays are so infrequent that we no longer enjoy the rapport we once had (year-round). Connecting on a personal level is what people need much more than a new toy, electronic gadget or a pair of shoes."

### Gifts that can go the distance

There's a barrage of reminders during December that expensive cars and diamond rings make dandy symbols of love and affection. But your grandma 1,000 miles away would probably get a lot more out of a letter — just not one of those canned and copied versions that are little more than a list of events that amount to bragging rights.

Take the time to write a letter aimed specifically at the heart of a loved one. "There is nothing that beats a

beautiful box of letters, tied in a bow, from your family," says April Masini, a relationship expert and Web-based advice columnist. "Have as many extended family members and friends as possible handwrite a letter and include reasons why the receiver is special."

Or put together a book or video. Sarah Merrill travels the country to help people do just that. A member of the Association of Personal Historians, she interviews subjects in-depth. Her product is professional. Yet, her example serves as a template for those who want to send that far-away relative a meaningful look into their lives and how that person has helped shape it. (Be sure to photocopy the letters you mail, and keep a copy of the book or videos — they are keepsakes for yourself as well as the recipient.)

"Every person has a life worth documenting," Merrill says. "Sharing your stories with your family and friends brings you closer to them. It is the most important legacy you can share: your words and your wisdom."

— R.A.

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