

HOLIDAY STRESS Don't Let It Get You Down

Stress may not be the first thing that comes to mind when we think of the Thanksgiving and winter holidays; but we feel its effects in January. Too often, holidays are accompanied by the emotional whiplash of anticipatory stress followed by post-holiday letdown; it can take us the rest of the winter to recover.

Causes

Many factors can contribute to holiday stress. Some of the most common include:

1. Emphasizing gifts, decorating and meals, forgetting that people are more important than things, events or tasks.
2. Assuming all the responsibility for making the holidays a success. This inevitably leads to exhaustion and resentment about not getting more help from others.
3. Making "getting everything done" the primary goal, rather than the fun of shared activities.
4. Commercial pressures to create a "perfect Christmas" by being sure that everyone has the appropriate gift and that you have the perfect attire for each holiday function-even if you go into debt to do it.
5. Sad memories of a loved one who is no longer near or of holidays when times were better.
6. Unfulfilled resolutions from last year's holidays such as losing 10 pounds, getting a better job, etc.
7. Unrealistic expectations, such as hoping *this* will be the year that Uncle Harry *doesn't* have too much to drink at Christmas dinner, or that this year, you really *will* see your high school friends while you're in town.

Families and Holidays

"Home for the holidays" can be full of stress as well as good cheer. After a day or two with our families during the holiday season, we often allow our tempers to flare, tensions to mount, and old resentments to resurface.

Family therapists identify the most common holiday family stresses as:

- a) feeling like a child again while in your parents' home for holiday visits;
- b) trouble seeing *your* grown children as adults while they're visiting;
- c) feeling isolated or alienated from your family after holiday visits.

To counteract these stresses, experts suggest that you:

1. Plan an agenda for your holiday visit, so that you don't fall back into childhood roles; take your parents out to dinner; spend time with each individually, plan some activities apart from the family.
2. Reverse roles and invite your parents to *your* home for the holidays.
3. Clarify expectations. You may want to visit with friends outside the family, but fear hurting your parents' feelings by dividing your time; grandparents may not want to spend every minute of a week-long visit with their grandchildren, no matter how much they love them!
4. Expect the normal tensions of more than the usual number of people living together away from home, and don't take them too seriously when they arise.

Holiday Tips

Some experts identify poor time management, and eating and drinking too much as the primary culprits leading to holiday stress.

Simply saying "No" is a good time manager. Try these tactful approaches:

- "Yes, if you'll help me!"
- "I really can't give that the attention it deserves right now."
- "I'd love to, but right now my time is like water in a drought -- I need every drop!"

Control your holiday eating by:

- Eat only what you *really want*; not the whole meal.
- Instead of lunch on the day of a big dinner, have only a light snack.
- If you *do* overeat, wait until you *truly* feel hungry before eating again.
- Cut down on the amount of *talking about food* that you do.

Reducing Holiday Stress

1. Share the work as well as the joy, of holiday events. Plan a progressive holiday dinner instead of doing it alone; divide shopping and baking with friends and family; have a tree-trimming party.

2. Focus on enjoying yourself and those around you rather than worrying about sticking to a schedule.
3. Don't accept every invitation. Choose the activities that you most want to attend and send regrets to those that are meaningless to you. Don't feel obligated to eat and drink at every party you do attend.
4. Be realistic in your expectations about the holidays. As in any other season of the year, there will be disappointments as well as excitement; friction as well as happiness. Don't expect yourself or those around you to be at your best all the time.
5. Maintain regular diet and sleep routines as much as possible.
6. Use cues to help you relax-bits of red or green yarn or ribbon on your phone, car dash, desk and other familiar spots will remind you to slow down, take 3 deep breaths, and relax!