

# Healthy Ways for a Stress-Free Holiday Season

The holidays are supposed to be a pleasurable and enjoyable time. A time when people gather to celebrate a day, an occasion or a season, right? Not necessarily. For many people, the holidays cause stress and anxiety.

## What makes the holidays so stressful?

Some factors that increase stress include: time, money, family, death and grief, depression, alcohol, and food.

### TIME

Time becomes precious as the holidays approach because more needs to be done *in addition* to daily responsibilities. There are parties and school events to attend, presents to buy, make, and wrap, groceries to shop for, and food to prepare for holiday events.

Suddenly there are more tasks to be completed in the same amount of limited time. And, unfortunately, responsibilities like work, child care, relationships, and bills cannot be ignored simply because of the holidays.

Since some people are currently celebrating holidays and others are preparing to, now is a good time to improve your time management skills.

- **Create a list of responsibilities** that you need to complete. Then determine if it is possible to complete it within a realistic timeframe. If not, ask others (partners, siblings, children) to complete some tasks. Otherwise, recognize that not all of your tasks are necessary, and

cross those items off the list. For example, hosting Thanksgiving requires a visit to the grocery store. However, you do not *need* to have napkin rings, placecards, or perfectly crafted decorations.

- **Review your list and identify dates** when items need to be accomplished. Mark them in your calendar or hang the dated list on the refrigerator.
- **Start accomplishing tasks during off-peak hours.** For example, grocery stores are less crowded early in the morning, and during the week, and retail stores often extend their morning and evening hours. Consider shopping before or after work to take advantage of these opportunities.
- **Schedule stress-free time for yourself.** Exercise, read a book, take a walk, play with your children, laugh with your friends. Determine a day and time (perhaps Sunday at 3:00pm) where you do not schedule any other responsibilities. Use this as stress-free time. Do not forgo this because the holidays are approaching. Enjoyable and relaxing activities are even more necessary during the stressful holiday season.

## FINANCES

Finances often become strained during the holidays. People feel the need to get the “right” present or host the perfect party or dinner. As a result, people spend money they do not have. The accrued debt causes distress not only during the holiday season, but for months and even years later.

Before you start shopping and spending money that you do not have, create a budget. Determine how much money you can spend during the holiday season and spend accordingly. To create a budget, make a list of

all of your expenses (including coffee, cigarettes, etc.). Then make a list of your income. Subtract your expenses from your income and that is how much money you can spend this holiday season. If you want extra money, look at your expenses list and see what you can reduce (i.e. pack a lunch instead of eating out).

If your resulting holiday budget is not as large as you would like, you may have to buy fewer or less expensive gifts than you did in the past. Be creative and make gifts. Think about making gift certificates that are redeemable for your time (a future sledding date, cuddle time, or cookie making time). Rather than providing the entire meal, ask others to contribute dishes, which will reduce your grocery expense. For more detailed information on how to create a budget look at these resources:

- “Get A Financial Life” by Beth Koblner
- <http://money.cnn.com/pf/101/lessons/2/>

## FAMILIES

For many people, their families are a source of support and strength. They interact on a regular basis and enjoy each other's company. For these families, the holidays are another time to be together and celebrate. It is a time that they look forward to.

Unfortunately, this is not true for everyone. Some people feel stress, anxiety, and even pain when they are with their family. This may be a result of old tensions, alcohol or drug use, different value systems, or abuse or neglect. As a result, holidays with the family are not always pleasant and enjoyable. If this is the case for you, consider the following question:

Do I *have* to spend the holidays with my family?

Actually, you don't. As an adult you can decide what is best for you. If spending the holidays with your family will not be enjoyable or healthy for you then you can choose not to go.

Once you remember that you have a choice regarding the holidays, you can choose to do things differently. Maybe spending the holidays with your family has not been enjoyable for you in the past, but you still want to see them. Before the holidays arrive spend some time thinking about what makes interacting with your family difficult. After you have done this you can better prepare for your visit.

- Take time to slow yourself down. **Deep breathing, prayer, and meditation** can help you take time to *think* about how to respond to family situations rather than automatically reacting to them.
- You can also bring a friend with you. Your friend will be there to support you and make sure that you stay safe. You can also identify a family member that you get along with or care for and spend time with that person.
- Finally, remember that now that you are an adult you can determine when you come and go. You can go to another room to slow yourself down or even take a walk. If you need or want to leave the celebration early, you can do that as well.

## DEATH, GRIEF, and LOSS

Death, grief, and loss are other factors that make the holidays difficult. When a loved one dies, everything changes, including holiday celebrations. The sorrow associated with death is immense and the

holiday season can intensify these feelings. Other types of losses such as divorce, changes in relationships or losing a job can also cause anxiety and stress during the holiday season. As a result of these losses, the holidays will be different.

In order to deal with death and grief during the holidays, it is important that you bolster your support *now*. Let others know that the holidays will be difficult for you and you want their support. Be specific about how you want them to support you. Perhaps you want more contact with your family and friends. Maybe you want to celebrate the holidays with them. When people are dealing with death and grief, their friends and family often feel that there is nothing they can do to help. People who love and care about you want to help you, so ask them for their support and assistance.

Next it is important to determine how you want to celebrate the holidays. Do you want to celebrate as you have in the past? Do you want to create a new holiday tradition? Do you want to create a memorial for the person who has died? These are all questions to consider and begin answering *before* the holidays arrive.

## DEPRESSION

Depression is a mental illness that affects many people and those who love them. Unfortunately, the holidays can exacerbate the symptoms. Similar to the stress and anxiety some people feel during the holidays, feelings of depression also occur. To mitigate the feelings and symptoms of depression, consider these suggestions:

- Stay connected to friends, family, and co-workers. **Do not isolate yourself.** Ask others to stay in contact with you, even when you do not consistently reciprocate.
- Create a daily routine to keep you busy and focused.
- Determine a regular time to awake and go to bed.
- Eat meals at regularly scheduled times, and leave your house daily.
- If these tasks are difficult to do on your own, consider seeking professional assistance.

## ALCOHOL

Many holiday celebrations include alcohol. Whether it is a dinner, an office cocktail party, or a party reception, free flowing alcohol is readily available from now until New Year's. This can be particularly troublesome for people who struggle with overindulgence or an addiction. Rather than ignore the difficulties that are approaching, acknowledge them and prepare to manage them this holiday season.

- Tell a friend or partner that you need their help in limiting or abstaining from alcohol during this season. Perhaps they are willing to be a verbal reminder that you do not want to overindulge with alcohol.
- If you worry that you cannot control your alcohol intake this season, you can choose to abstain from some events. Don't go to the office party that has a reputation for a lot of drinking.
- Consider seeking peer or professional support during this time. Alcoholics Anonymous and/or therapists who specialize in working with addictions can be particularly helpful.
- Log onto <http://www.sepennaa.org/meetings/> to locate AA meetings in your area.

## FOOD

Some people use food as a way to manage or numb their feelings, similar to how some people use drugs and alcohol. During the holiday season, there is a greater emphasis on food. Some holidays have a focus on fasting, abstaining from food, while other holidays focus on an abundance of food. However, some people become extreme in their focus on eating too much or not eating at all. Here are some quick tips to maintain a consistent food intake during the holiday season:

- Eat meals at regularly scheduled times.
- Do not eat because of an emotion (feeling, sad, depressed, happy).
- Stop eating when you feel full. Do not feel obligated to finish the portion.
- For additional information, log onto <http://www.renfrew.org/>

The stress of the holidays can lead people to address it in various ways. Some methods are healthy and productive, others are harmful and destructive. Using, alcohol, drugs, and food to cope with the stress of the holidays is common but unhealthy and potentially dangerous. It can lead to a continuous pattern and possibly turn into an addiction. Rather than take this risk, consider following the aforementioned suggestions to cope with the stress of the holidays in a healthy way.

This time of the year creates a highly charged atmosphere that is contagious. It can be fun, energetic, and exciting. But it can also create tension, anxiety, and stress. Rather than allow the stress of the holiday season to overcome you, implement some of these strategies and have a more satisfying holiday season. Have a safe, relaxing, and healthy holiday season!

If you need additional or professional support during this time, consider connecting with a psychotherapist. Contact me at 215-421-9056 or [e-mail me](#).