

# Managing Holiday Stress

Holidays can be an opportunity to celebrate the values you cherish and the people you love. They can also add to your stress. At a traditionally joyous time of year, you may have many extra tasks and events that need to be squeezed into an already tight schedule. You might find yourself trying to do the impossible in a short amount of time, on a limited budget, and with conflicting demands pulling you in different directions.

Some stress may be unavoidable at holiday times, but it doesn't have to feel overwhelming. If you're in a relationship, it's a good idea for you and your partner to discuss your holiday planning together. Here are some ways to ease the pressures on yourself and others in your household.

## Reducing time stress

Extra holiday tasks and events can lead to overload. Taking the following steps can ease the time crunch:

- *Set realistic expectations.* Ask yourself what you want the holiday to be or to mean. What part of it matters most to you? If sharing time with family is most important, why not skip shopping and spend a day sledding or a few hours at a free holiday concert with your children, nieces, or nephews? If you plan to have people over for a meal, say "yes" when others ask if they can bring something or make the main course and ask guests to contribute the rest. Including your guests in the preparation can make them feel part of the celebration.
- *Prioritize.* Make a list of all the things you need to do and decide which ones are the most important. Do your top priorities first and the rest if you have time. You may not get to everything on the list but if you do the important things, the rest probably won't matter. Consider delegating some of the tasks to others.
- *Take advantage of new tools that can reduce holiday stress.* Look into free or low-cost apps or software for your smartphone or computer that will make it easier to coordinate your tasks. Some apps help you organize your gift and shopping lists. Others bundle holiday stories or songs for children. Search online using terms such as "free holiday apps" to see what's available.
- *Say "no."* If you have a tendency to take on too much, learn to say "no" when people ask you to do just one more thing. Or maybe just find a few shortcuts if you can't resist

saying "yes." For example, you don't have to make all the cookies for the parent-teacher association party or the hockey wind-up from scratch -- buy the cookie dough and bake it. Send electronic greeting cards from Blue Mountain (<http://www.bluemountain.com>) or a similar website. Writing your family greeting or holiday letter on your computer allows you to include photos and holiday decorations, and send it via email so you don't have to stamp and address envelopes.

- *Rethink your traditions.* Some traditions may take up a lot of time long after they have lost their meaning for you or your family. Think about whether this is a good time to replace those traditions with ones that would fit your needs better.

## Reducing financial stress

Spending too much money and going into debt can cause financial stress that may last long after the holidays have ended.

- *Set a realistic budget and stick to it.* Plan for an increase in spending if meals, gifts, and entertainment are part of the holiday. Know how much you can spend before you go shopping or before you decide how many people to invite for a holiday meal. This will keep you from spending more than you should.
- *Talk with children about financial limits.* If you have a child who wants an expensive toy, it's OK to tell him that everyone has financial limitations. Save your money and use it to get a head start on planning for the following year.
- *Pare down your gift list.* Ask yourself if you could give fewer or less expensive gifts without hurting anyone's feelings. Could you and your relatives agree to draw names and give gifts to only one or two people instead of everybody? Give homemade coupons or "I.O.U.s" that people can redeem after the holidays? Or could you set limits or rough guidelines for the cost of gifts so relatives don't feel pressured to overspend? Some families enjoy making homemade gifts, such as crafts, salad dressing, simple beaded jewelry, a home video or photo album, or a CD of favourite songs.

## Reducing family stress

Family tensions can flare up quickly when you get together with relatives who have different personalities and different ideas about how to celebrate the holidays.

- *Set differences aside.* Holidays may bring together family members who, at other times of the year, are happier apart. It's often best to avoid potentially heated discussion topics or save them for another time. And remember that you can decide whom you want to spend the holiday with and how much time you want to spend together. A

holiday gathering is about getting along with people to the best of your ability, not about putting yourself in anxiety-producing or "loaded" situations.

- *Get emotional support.* If you miss people who have passed away or relatives who can't be there to celebrate, reach out to friends or family who can give you emotional support. If the people close to you can't provide support, consider talking with a therapist or other counsellor who can help, such as a spiritual advisor.
- *Remember that families come in all shapes and sizes.* If you have always wanted that big family but have few family members living nearby, expand your family for the holiday to include friends, or people who might be alone. Or, if you find a big family gathering too overwhelming, invite a few close relatives rather than going to or having a big family gathering yourself. Talk with your partner and family about what you would like to try differently this year. They may feel as you do or may understand your needs and want to help you meet them.
- *Plan ahead for holiday caregiving responsibilities.* Talk early in the season with older relatives or other family members you care for about whether they have special holiday wishes or needs so you'll have time to accommodate them. If you have questions about how to ease the stress of holiday caregiving and would like ideas from a supportive community, join the Caregiver Online Group on the site for the Family Caregiver Alliance (<http://www.caregiver.org>).

## Other ways to manage holiday stress

Following are other good ways to manage holiday stress:

- *Be a kid again.* Take some time to play and just enjoy the scenery. Notice holiday decorations and the yummy smells. Take a nature walk, go skating, try some deep-breathing exercises -- whatever helps you relax for a while.
- *Get plenty of rest and exercise.* It's easy to forget to do the things that keep you healthy when you have so much to do. Keeping to your regular sleeping and exercise routines will give you the energy to do everything you need to do, and it will retain some normalcy in your life.
- *Remember that other people are also dealing with the stress and pressure of holidays.* If you are in a traffic jam at the mall, you're one of many people trying to get everything done to make their celebrations run as smoothly as possible. Don't take the difficulty of finding parking spaces personally.

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