

Keeping Holiday Stress at Bay

Some people look forward to the holidays all year, while others see the holiday season approaching and are overcome by a sense of dread. "Will life become so hectic that I can't enjoy the holidays? How will I buy what I need to buy and not overspend again this year? How will I ever get everything done that I need to do? How many pounds will I gain this year? Will the family get along?" The list could go on and on, but all these questions, if left unaddressed, lead to the same thing... stress! Try these tips for managing the stress that seems to be built into the holiday season.

Set priorities.

People tend to get wrapped up in trying to create perfection at this time of the year. Set reasonable goals for what you will do to celebrate. Decide in advance what is most important to you and your family, and focus your celebrations around those things. Try to avoid replicating everything your parents did when you were young. Hang on to meaningful traditions, but avoid doing something solely because it is what your mom or dad did.

Don't overschedule! Both you and your kids need downtime to enjoy this special time of the year. Be careful to choose activities based on what you *want* to do rather than what you think you *must* do.

Make a plan.

Once you have decided what your priorities are for holiday celebrations, plan how you will organize yourself to get the important work done. Make a calendar, and include all important dates on it (the school play, the neighbor's open house, the drive through the neighborhood to enjoy the holiday decorations, and so on). You may even want to schedule time for any shopping, decorating, baking, writing cards, or other holiday traditions that you have decided will be part of your holiday. Carefully plan your menus and do your shopping in an organized fashion, with a list. You will be much less likely to forget important ingredients and eliminate the last-minute running that leaves you exhausted and frazzled.

Keep expectations realistic.

It is not your responsibility to be sure that everybody has a perfect holiday, so don't put that demand on yourself. Holiday joy is something that comes from within a person—you cannot create something that is not there.

Make a budget, and keep it.

If gift buying is part of your holiday celebration, decide in advance what you can afford to spend this year. Create a list of all the people you will shop for, and allocate a portion of your total holiday budget to each person. That is the easy part—the hard part is sticking to the budget you create! Try to think of less expensive gift options—a baking mix, a nicely framed photograph of a shared memory, or the gift of your time. Overspending during the holidays is a major source of stress, so be careful. Remember that all the gifts in the world cannot buy happiness.

Care for yourself and your family.

During the holidays, when stress can really take its toll, people tend to neglect doing those things that

reduce stress. You may overindulge in food and drink, and leave such things as rest, relaxation, and exercise out of your daily life. Make it a goal to change that this holiday season. Be realistic about the types and amounts of foods you choose. Avoid sugary and fat-laden snacks that may give you a quick boost but will be followed by a drop in energy. Get outside for a brisk walk, and take the kids. Think about what is causing your stress, and make a plan to change the pressures you may be putting on yourself. Rest, relax, and reflect on the meaning of the season—peace!

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