

Solutions for the Holidays

Enjoying the Holidays: Stress Prevention and Relief

By Anne Brunette, MSW

Planning holiday parties, family celebrations, gift buying, stringing lights, decorating, school performances, and religious services: Just a few of the many obligations families have that can create wonderful memories—and extreme stress. Now that Halloween is over and the holiday season is in full swing, we are beginning to see Thanksgiving and Christmas decorations everywhere. The holidays can not only be joyous and special times to celebrate with family and friends, but also stressful times. Finding ways to prevent and relieve stress during the holidays can help you and your family create meaningful memories for years to come.

Stress is a combination of physical responses, anxious thoughts, and emotional reactions that can make you feel jumpy and nervous, worried and upset. It causes physical changes and often impacts behavior. Physical symptoms of stress can include: racing heart, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath, sweating, fatigue, sleeping problems, irritability, tightness in the chest, overeating or undereating, and nausea. These are natural bodily responses to stress, and they let us know that something is not quite right.

Our thoughts also change when we feel stress. Because of the physical changes stress creates in our bodies, sometimes we have difficulty thinking clearly. The good news is that we can also affect our stress level by changing our thoughts. The way we think about stress is essential to helping reduce it. Often, stress is created or made worse by our own thoughts about our ability to manage it. Changing our attitude about the holidays and being thankful for what we have allows us to enjoy them with minimal stress.

Preventing Holiday Stress

Before the holiday season begins, set priorities.

Determine as parents and as a family what the most important aspects of the season are. If you want the focus to be on the religious aspects of the holidays, first determine what you will do to ensure that this is what you

focus on. If family is most important, first choose and schedule activities that will make this the priority. Then make lists of other obligations and important traditions and limit or say no to the rest.

Set appropriate boundaries. Once you have prioritized, choose two or three aspects of each priority and make those special. Say no to the rest and leave the guilt behind. Forming your own family traditions is important, so make decisions based on what is best for your family. This often means bringing together the traditions of your family and those your spouse holds dear. By doing this, you create new traditions that your children will cherish.

Review your list of priorities often and make sure you are doing what is most important. Take time for yourself to slow down, relax and put things in perspective.

Maintain healthy eating and exercise habits. The holidays offer many opportunities to eat wonderful food. Eating in moderation and exercising will help prevent and reduce stress.

Relieving Holiday Stress

When you already feel stressed, there are many proven ways to decrease that stress including the following:

Good stress reduction begins with paying attention to and sometimes changing your breathing. When people become stressed, they usually begin to breathe more quickly. It is much more difficult to think clearly and decrease stress when your heart is beating fast. Take a deep breath. You will know you are taking a deep breath if you can see your stomach go out when you take a breath in. Blow out as much as you can. Take as many breaths as you need to in order to feel your heart beat slow to a more normal rate.

Recognize and change your thoughts. How do you talk to yourself? Are your thoughts generally negative and lead by fear? Do you tend to focus on the worst case scenario? You have the ability to change those thoughts. Remind yourself of your priorities. Remember the many holidays in the past when you were able to get everything finished, and it turned out just fine. Decide to let go of something that adds stress.

Remember, the holidays are meant to be enjoyed!

Do something for yourself. The time you take to nurture yourself will help you more effectively do what you want to do for others.

Ask for help. Do not try to do everything yourself. If you are hosting a party, allow others to bring something. Trust that if people ask to help, they mean it!

Learn relaxation techniques. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, and prayer have been proven to reduce stress. There are many resources available to help you relax.

Limit gift giving. Make gifts special instead of buying expensive ones. Let's face it; our kids generally have many toys. Giving them everything they could possibly want does not show them love; time, energy, and affection do.

Going in debt to buy **stuff** adds stress, it does not reduce it. Teach the joy of giving by going through gently used items around Thanksgiving time to give away to those who may not otherwise receive gifts. Focusing on what is most important during the holidays is essential to preventing and relieving stress. Start today by making a list, beginning with the most important aspect of the holidays and moving on from there. Say no to things that do not contribute to those top priorities. Remember, the holidays can be times of good memories and celebration, not worry and stress! ♦

The Holidays and You: Making them Meaningful

By Jackie Block, MFT

It is said that in each given day we may have two "free hours" that are not dedicated to family, work or household tasks. When the holidays are added, as an event that takes planning, preparation, and attending, well, you get the picture-where's all the free time to do this?

Most of us realize on some level, that there is no great joy in overdoing, overspending, overeating, overdrinking, and sleeping less. So, what mind set do you need to have a joyful holiday?

First: You must let go of the "shoulds" imposed upon you by commercialism, society, family and friends. Make a list of who is involved, how to make it meaningful, and what

you want from your holiday.

Second: Budget your holiday. No interest, no money down, credit card use. They only lead to paying off debt later which can cause you to feel perhaps a temporary joy when purchasing, but longer term stress when trying to juggle monthly bills. If you only have "X" amount of dollars, think about how you want to spend that money and who or what is most important for you to spend it on. Be creative and direct with people about what you can and cannot do.

Third: If you feel obligated to give a gift to those who give you gifts, or if you feel you should give a gift "just because," be honest. Nine times out of ten, the other giver may be relieved and no longer feel obligated to provide a gift for you. They may also choose to continue to do so and you, of course, can be a gracious recipient. It could also be fun to let them know if you could give them a gift, that you would give them this or that and tell them why you think this would be a special gift for them. You may also want to give them something of yours that they may truly appreciate.

Fourth: If you are tired of attending every party and event that you are invited to, say yes to only those most important to you. Really, it's ok to be honest and decline invitations. You may also want to start a trend with work, family, and friends to give money used for those parties to those less fortunate or plan time together at a less stressful time of the year.

Fifth: You are your child's most interesting toy! I think of the holidays as a time of over-tired and over-excited children. All the over planning and over doing really gets to everyone, which, of course, makes things less pleasant. It is not so much the gifts you give your children, it is the time. The following questions can help you focus your attention and make the holidays meaningful for your family:

How can you have your children help with the holiday preparation?

What special memories can be created and what meaningful traditions do you want to create?

What are the similarities and differences between your expectations and those of your family?

Discuss these questions with your spouse or children to help create understanding and harmony. Your time with your children is much more valuable than any gift you can give them.

Sixth: Take responsibility for your choices. If you choose to do things a certain way then make it meaningful and do it joyfully. If

others are not interested in contributing to your choices, that's ok! Accept them where they are at and create for yourself what you need.

Seventh: If you don't do it regularly, exercise to relieve stress, eat balanced meals to better deal with stress, and take time to relax to keep yourself grounded during what can be a stressful time of year.

Eighth: Think about holiday history. What feelings and memories do you carry with you? What new feelings and memories do you want to create? Don't attempt to live what you had through your children. See them in their own joy, with their own interests and feelings.

Ninth: If there have been changes in your life over the year which could include a move, death of a loved one, or divorce, the holidays may be particularly difficult. Seek out others to talk with. Take time for reflection. Look at new ways to do and see things. Give yourself permission to take time to re-evaluate and not invest as much time and energy to the holidays as you did so in the past. If the "holiday blues" are intense and continue for a long period of time, seek professional help. The holidays could be the catalyst that triggers clinical depression.

Tenth: Take care of yourself. Be responsible for your choices. Make this holiday a time for enjoying the people you love with no strings attached!

Managing Grief over the Holidays

Maintain familiarity. Continue old traditions if possible.
Avoid trying to please others. Do what you need to do for yourself.
Commemorate your loved one with a special new tradition.
Reach out to others. Helping others in need can help you.
Permit yourself some cheer without guilt. This does not mean you have forgotten.
Maintain connection with family and other support systems.
Let go of control. Allow yourself to express your emotions. Ignoring or avoiding your feelings will just make them more intense.
Get enough rest and eat healthy. When you do not take care of yourself, your ability to handle emotional stress decreases.
Utilize creative outlets. Write, draw, talk, sing, etc. Find ways to express your thoughts and feelings.

Children and the Holidays: Finding Teachable Moments

By Greg Henderson, MSSW

The setting is the family holiday dinner table. The characters are, of course, your family and friends. And the "star" - 4 year old Cynthia, who refuses to stop whining and wiggling. While everyone sits awkwardly around the table, Cynthia continues with her behavior until, finally, Mommy steps in and removes her from the scene. She will miss the special holiday meal and parents are feeling frustrated, disappointed and embarrassed.

Does this sound like a scene from a Christmas movie, or perhaps a little closer to your own home? Whether you are celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah or Kwanzaa, you will want to help your children prepare for the much-anticipated holiday gatherings.

Children (like adults) manage new or stressful situations when they are prepared. Some simple things that may help you and your children get ready for the upcoming holiday season:

Prior to attending a holiday event, set expectations. Tell you child where you are going, what will happen there, who will be there, what type of food or snack may be served and other information that will help them.

Make a game of learning table manners.

Remind children to say "no thank you" instead of "yuck" when broccoli is passed. Review the basics: chew with your mouth closed; stay seated until everyone is done eating; don't start eating until the hostess begins; take what you touch at a buffet line (and explain a buffet line if necessary)

Practice eating on a tablecloth with good dishes and candlelight before an event.

Use doll houses and toy people to act out the occasion, going over parts which will be new or different

Use bedtime to tell a story about an upcoming event

Practice sleeping on a roll-away or with sister/brother before company arrives or you head to the grandparents' home for the holiday

Feed children a large, healthy snack in advance. They won't be grouchy from hunger or fill up on too much sugar if they are fed a little ahead of time!

Set some basic rules and stick to them. Talk about the rules and behavior that is expected

when visiting family and friends since these may be different than the rules and boundaries set at home.

Help Your Kids Beat Holiday Stress

Stick to normal routines as much as possible.

Slow down and play

Make sure they get enough sleep.

Try to eat as healthy as possible between the treats.

Maintain family traditions.

Get them outside to play. Physical activity relieves stress.

Keep children's schedules and temperaments in mind when planning events. For example, rather than just skipping a theater event, you may want to take a child to an afternoon matinee if he/she is prone to "meltdowns" if they stay up past the regular bedtime.

After an event, or holiday gathering, review with your child how things went. Discuss what went well as well as things that could be improved. This can be a "teachable moment" for your children. Emphasize the positive - you don't want your children to dread family gatherings because all they hear afterward is what they did wrong. Praise them for situations they handled well and how they made you proud.

Remember that children are expert observers. They will learn what they see and hear. Do you lose it when the meal isn't perfect? How do you cope with the gift buying and decorating? Model good coping skills for your children.

You will be spending more time with your children over the holidays. The best gift of all is the quality of the time spent together and the verbal presents we share with each other.

And finally, lower your expectations for your children, for your company and for yourself. Do your best to have things ready, but remember - the real event is about your family and the time you are spending together. Make it a memorable holiday season!♦

Good Communication: A Key to Happy Holidays

By Matt Doll, Ph.D.

For many adults and children, the holidays are a time to be around family. Relatives that are rarely seen, friends of the family, large crowds of people laughing and carrying on, old issues under the surface, good feelings and bad

can all occur over the holidays. Smaller children often have increased anxiety at these times, with unfamiliar faces and sounds. Many adults do as well. In order to spread "Holiday Cheer and Goodwill" you will need to communicate effectively.

Good communication is based on awareness and sensitivity to our own signals and the signals of others around us. When it works, the message sent is the same as the message received.

This article will focus on verbal communication, but it is important to remember that not all signals are verbal. Body language tells us what people MEAN by the words they say.

Sixty-five percent of all information is conveyed via body language, not words. Body language includes physical posture, gestures, facial expression, hair style and clothing. While you may say to your aunt that you are interested in what she is saying, your hand over your mouth and eyes on other people at the party convey a different meaning. While you may have said to your brother that you are "over" that argument you had last year, your avoidance of him and general physical distance sends a clear message.

First, good communication is about a good **Attitude**: allowing yourself to feel positive and in control of yourself. When you smile, blood flow changes in your brain. When you think positively, you are better able to achieve your goals. "Glass-Half-Full" people actually live longer than their "Glass-Half-Empty" counterparts.

When we are happy we feel better physically. Yet at times we dwell on the negative, looking for things in situations and in people that confirm our negative beliefs. For instance, we rehearse all the imagined slights we have "suffered". What we pay attention to will determine what we experience. For example, when we buy a new car, suddenly we see it on the road all the time. Or when you have a gripe with a family member, they do it all the time. Or if you are bothered or embarrassed with a child's behavior, it is all you see your child doing. To turn this around, change what you are looking for.

Pay attention to the efforts that estranged family members make in connecting. Look for the good in others, and you will see it. In talking about her work with the needy, Mother Teresa said that she got to see the face of God in each and every one she helped. Start with a positive **Attitude**.

Next, be aware of what makes people feel comfortable. Helping others feel

comfortable when we communicate with them improves both their and our ability to effectively communicate. Try to understand why you feel uncomfortable at times. For the most part, we are creatures of comfort. We seek things that are familiar to us.

When the people and things around us are familiar and consistent with our expectations, we relax, we are in control and comfortable. When they are not, we seek to make them so. To further understand this, let's briefly look at our earliest experiences.

Our brain is a dynamic, changing organ. We literally write and rewrite neurological paths when we use it. How we are able to use these paths changes with development and time. We start out with the skills we need to survive: attention to patterns, faces and basic needs. We begin to explore our world and incorporate experience into our thinking. When things are in sync, they make sense to us. We cry for food, we get fed; we cry to be changed, we are cleaned; we hurt, we are comforted. We are in **Synchrony** with our environment. This basic pattern is how we establish our sense of security in the world.

Synchrony lays the foundation that allows us to grow and become independent, healthy functioning adults. It is the foundation of **attachment**. Attachment impacts how much intimate communication a person can tolerate and how well they form their relationships.

When individuals have developed in an environment where their needs were not met in a predictable and consistent fashion, they may struggle with relationships throughout their lifetime. Intimate relationships and social gatherings may pose a greater challenge for them. Adults and children both have varied attachment behaviors. Think of going to your first family gathering with a significant other where you may have "clung" to each other. Later on in the relationship, after you both feel more attached, you may check in from time to time but tolerate more separate moments. (This does not necessarily imply that by ignoring your partner, you are very well-attached, football games or not!)

Individual Differences, both separately and as a family group, are important to recognize. Each person and family has their own way of communicating; loud, quiet, boisterous, reserved, open, closed, serious, or humorous. When we gather for the holidays, we mix and match different patterns of behavior, both familiar and novel. If we have a solid sense of ourselves, we can tolerate and even enjoy a

variety of different ways of doing things. However, under stress, difficult situations or extreme conditions, we may have a greater challenge in handling situations that are out of "sync" with us.

Another issue related to development and communication is **Procedural Memory**. Procedural memory is obtained without conscious experience of learning. It is the "how" of a relationship. Child and adult interaction creates a common, shared understanding and an expectation of how future interactions will unfold. These memories, based on a child's interactions with parents and care providers, lay down the working model for relationships.

To help adults feel comfortable, no matter what their procedural memory, reflect their comments, notice their nonverbal cues, and be in **sync** with them. Match their tone and communication style and be aware of your own "procedural memory". You may find that you expect people to behave in the same way year after year. Try to expand and challenge your views, or enjoy them for their consistency. Following these tips will greatly improve your holiday season!♦

Ten Keys to Effective Listening:

Find areas of interest
Judge content, not delivery
Hold your fire
Listen for ideas
Be flexible
Work at listening
Resist distractions
Exercise your mind
Keep your mind open
Capitalize on the fact that thought is faster than speech and think of questions to ask