

Facing Holiday Stress

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Happy Holidays! For many people, the holiday season is a time of family togetherness and goodwill. But for many others, the holidays are lonely and dreadful times. Perhaps a loved one is missing, or you are separated from family and friends in a new community far from home. Others find the holiday season very stressful due to added responsibilities and overfilled calendars.

The normal stresses of job and home life are greatly intensified by the pressures of shopping, decorating, spending, entertaining, travel and the like. No matter the reason, the emotional pain, stress and spiritual hunger experienced during the holidays can be relieved.

Realistic Expectations of Ourselves and Our Loved Ones Can Lead Us to the True Meaning of the Holiday Season.

Stress experienced during the holidays is often due to our own expectations of ourselves to be all things to all people regardless of the physical, mental and financial strain it places on us.

We've all heard of "Super Mom," who holds down a job while maintaining a busy household. Every year at this time she also shops for the perfect gift for everyone, writes personal messages in every card she sends and bakes dozens of cookies, just like grandmother used to do. Sound familiar?

Then there's "Super Dad," who wants to give his family a perfect holiday with all the trimmings. Maybe he is feeling a little guilty over the lack of time he spends with them and is trying to compensate. Or perhaps his parents were unable to afford much gift giving. But Dad still worries about how to stretch the budget to cover the added expenses, so he volunteers for overtime at the job.

Anytime we add extra responsibilities to an already busy schedule without adjusting it accordingly, we are adding to our stress. Stress builds on itself causing sleeplessness and confusion. It becomes increasingly difficult to feel well or happy, to think clearly or make appropriate decisions and to experience joy.

Another stressor present during the holiday season is that of rampant materialism coupled with false or exaggerated warmth. Do you feel yourself becoming tense whenever you think of all there is to do in preparation for the holidays? Maybe you can sit down and think through your priorities. Once you have done that, spend time organizing and planning ahead. Even shopping can be more enjoyable if we plan in advance. Try to shop

when stores are less crowded or when you are less rushed. Maybe even do some click and order shopping in addition to brick and mortar shopping.

When the Tension Builds

- Seek out support or 12 step groups.
- Reach out to others for caring and sharing.
- Don't give in to pressure to accommodate people you ordinarily wouldn't.
- Be yourself. Do not put on a façade just to please others. Don't let them rob you of who you want to be.
- Give of yourself to others in need.
- Take a realistic look at the marketing of the season and your own-screened memories from past holidays.

The Santa Myth

Many of us still carry an unconscious idea or fantasy known as the "Santa Myth." We continue to expect its childhood magic. Maybe the day was "perfect" for us when we were little and still believed in Santa, or maybe it never was and we keep wishing that it could be. We feel sad, disappointed, and letdown when we do not receive the ultimate gift or the day somehow falls short of those so often depicted in the movies. Perhaps it would help us to look at the Santa - good or bad - of our memories.

So What Can We Do?

If you are feeling lonely, sad, stressed or depressed this holiday season, you first need to acknowledge this fact to yourself. Don't smother the pain with pretense or pills, with activity or alcohol. Pain is actually a sign of health and aliveness.

Perhaps you dread the loneliness of the day if family and friends will be missing. Don't set yourself up to be alone. Reach out to others who may need companionship. Invite someone else to join you, as you may wish someone had done for you.

Are you struggling with the realities of a tight budget? The holidays are marked by excesses. It is important for you to be honest with yourself and your loved ones. There is no shame in doing only what you can afford. A gift of love is not valued on a cash register or credit card bill.

Take Care of Yourself

Statistics show that we are especially vulnerable to illness and accidents when we are overly tired or under excessive stress. Here are some health tips to remember during the holidays:

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat well and slowly - watch the sugar and alcohol.

- Take a multi-vitamin.
- Avoid excessive amounts of coffee and tea.
- Recognize that alcohol, cigarettes, tranquilizers and other drugs can increase stress
- Plan some regular exercise into your schedule.

Treat Yourself

We all know the personal things that bring us joy. Create an atmosphere of environment for yourself that lifts your spirits. Perhaps this is putting up your favorite decorations; listen to special music or the smell of baking Christmas cookies.

Whatever it is, only you know how to treat yourself - be sure to do it!

Relax

You can do much to relieve stress before it begins. Here is a simple exercise to do at your desk, on the bus or at home.

1. Close your eyes and get comfortable.
2. Take slow full breaths.
3. With each breath, tell yourself to relax - that the breath will relax you.
4. As you exhale, tell yourself that all your tension and stress are leaving your body.
5. Do this for several minutes until you feel your body begin to relax.

The Day After

The holidays are over now. The tree is drying out and losing its needles. The cards still trickle in, but you haven't yet heard from your favorite college friend. It's easy to feel a little low. We hope, instead, that you will reflect on a holiday season that may not have been perfect, but at least satisfied you emotionally and renewed your spiritual hopes. You can take the responsibility to make the holidays better for yourself, your loved ones and everyone who comes into contact with you.

From an unnamed publication adapted by The Rev. Dr. Gary L. Hulme, D.Min., Pastoral Counseling of Northern Virginia. 2003.

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