

De-**STRESSING** the Holidays

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When we think of the holidays, we often think of the magic portrayed in movies and media, or magical childhood memories. Year after year we strive for the perfect holiday season, only to feel disappointed, overwhelmed and **STRESSED** again.

The holidays don't have to be this way. By understanding the causes of holiday stress and making a few simple changes, you can minimize the stress. In turn, you will also maximize your enjoyment of the season.

Some of the greatest holiday stressors come from expectations, relationships and commercialism.

Expectations:

We often approach the holidays with unrealistic expectations of what the holiday season "should" be like. Too often, we bombard ourselves with demands to create the perfect holiday. Baking, decorating, shopping, entertaining and attending holiday events can all be wonderful activities, however, demanding too much of ourselves leaves us feeling overwhelmed rather than feeling the season's intended love and joy.

We also tend to create gift giving expectations for ourselves. We want to find the perfect gift for loved ones which often drives us to overindulge financially. This often leads to financial stress for months to come.

Relationships:

Holiday relationship stress can be induced by too much togetherness, not enough togetherness, and/or unresolved feelings of loss. Feelings of too much togetherness often result from extended family roles. These roles are usually created when we are growing up. When we gather with our family we often fall back into these roles even if we are very different now. Difficulty breaking out of these roles often creates a feeling of dread in being with family members.

If you don't have family to gather with you may feel alone, lonely and deserted at this time focused on family gatherings. If you've experienced a significant loss in the past year, the holidays can be especially lonely and difficult. In order to live up to the holiday expectations, we often try to put these feelings aside. Unfortunately, this often exaggerates the feelings of loss.

Commercialism:

Holiday advertising often conveys the message of the perfect holidays as being connected to extravagant gift giving. The message conveyed is, "The more we buy the happier we'll feel." Unfortunately, the effort to achieve this depletes us emotionally and financially.

Preventing Stress:

There are many things you can do to prevent holiday stress in these three major areas:

1. Expectations:

Challenging our thinking can be very helpful in creating realistic expectations. This can include prioritizing what is most important, and choosing a few things you want to be sure to do. Allow yourself to let go of other traditions so you can focus on and get the most from those more important traditions. Sometimes it can even help to simplify by letting go of old traditions and starting a couple new traditions.

To manage financial expectations, it may be helpful to set a gift giving budget before heading out to shop. Then, stick to it when shopping. Donating to a charity in someone's name, starting a

family gift exchange or giving homemade gifts or baked goods can help to manage finances and still provide the enjoyment of the giving spirit of the holidays.

Planning ahead and setting specific days for certain holiday activities can help to keep things realistic. It helps us see upfront the finite time frame of the holiday season. Planning out our activities can also help to reframe the holidays as a process rather than an all-or-nothing, one-day event.

2. Relationships:

Too much togetherness may be best managed by actively selecting which holiday gatherings you will participate in and establishing how long you will stay at each event. Prioritizing invitations and even saying “No” to new invitations that pop up can help maintain a manageable stress level. Sometimes, it can help to establish new extended family traditions to break those old roles.

If you experience not enough togetherness during the holidays it may be helpful to seek out support for yourself. Community, religious and social groups can help us feel connected to others during this time. It can also help to stay connected to relatives through pictures and home DVDs. Finally, volunteering at a homeless shelter or a food pantry can help us feel connected to the larger community during this time.

If you have experienced a significant loss, it is normal to grieve and feel sad. It is okay to cry and express your feelings. You don't have to force yourself to be happy just because it is the holiday season. Acknowledging your feelings to yourself and others will help you feel true to yourself. It may also help to let others know what you really need, as they may not know how to help you. Most of all, you may need your loved ones understanding through this time.

Finally, your relationship with yourself is very important during this time. Be sure to hold onto scheduled physical exercise and get plenty of sleep. Also, be sure to take some time away from the busyness for some quiet, alone time to relax or listen to music.

3. Commercialism:

You can beat commercialism by focusing on activities that are free and setting realistic gift expectations with family members, especially children. It can also help to refocus your energy on giving rather than getting. Volunteering, giving to a needy family, baking for those who may be homebound, and helping children select old toys to give to less fortunate children are great ways to overcome the season's commercialism.

Preventing all the holiday stress is unrealistic, so it may be helpful to be aware of when the stress is getting unmanageable. If you experience any of these symptoms, you may be overstressed:

- ✓ Emotional discomfort—feeling irritable, tense, or overwhelmed
- ✓ Sleepless nights—either unusual difficulty going to sleep or waking during the night.
- ✓ Weight shifts—gaining or losing weight without explanation
- ✓ Physical aches and pains—either muscle aches, headaches or stomach aches
- ✓ Increased/excessive eating or alcohol consumption
- ✓ Inability to face routine chores.

If the above strategies don't work for you or your stress is becoming unmanageable, your feelings may be about more than just the holidays. These feelings may be about other things going on in your life, or you may be experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or depression. Arbor Counseling Center has many licensed professionals and can recommend a therapist that meets your needs. Please call **847-913-0393** to set up an initial consultation.