

COPING WITH THE STRESS OF THE HOLIDAYS

While the winter holidays are traditionally a time of joy and fellowship, the season also carries a number of stresses with it, some of them hidden behind the lights and merriment. Rates of depression, substance abuse, domestic strife, not to mention anxiety and worry, all increase at this time of year. Holiday stress can be sorted into several categories:

TYPICAL HOLIDAY STRESSORS

Family related:

Too little family. Those who are separated from family due to geographical distance, serving in the armed forces, divorce, and estrangement from family often feel lonely and isolated at this time of year.

Too much family. Unresolved family conflicts, unrealistic expectations of what the family gathering should be like, confusion about one's place in the family all can create anxiety about getting together and tension when the family does gather.

Anniversary issues. Holidays often bring back memories of the past. Remembering happier times may result in grief over what has been lost. Recalling traumatic experiences is bound to dampen one's spirits in the midst of a celebration.

Social stressors:

Shopping in crowds, standing in lines, driving in traffic, entertaining guests or attending social functions creates a lot more opportunity for social anxiety than almost any other time of the year. Even writing greeting cards and selecting "the right gift" may feel like pressure after a while, especially with deadlines for getting them in the mail.

Temptations and Overindulgences:

Eating too much of the wrong foods, drinking alcohol, spending too much money, and generally "overdoing it" often lead to feeling out of control and guilt.

Environmental issues:

Traveling in bad weather is always stressful, but it is compounded by extra traffic and delays. December is also the darkest month of the year, with daylight barely lasting eight hours in the Pacific Northwest, resulting in a wintertime depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Financial issues:

When the economy is in the dumps and you or other family members are out of work you may not have the means to put up your usual decorations, provide gifts, entertain, or even make the meals you have had in the past.

STRESSFUL THINKING DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Certain kinds of dysfunctional thinking can occur during the holidays that contribute to stress. These consist of Shoulds (unrealistic demands we place on ourselves and others), Catastrophizing (focusing on the worst possible scenario), and All or Nothing Thinking. Below are some examples.

The Shoulds

I really should....

- get the cards done on time
- get the shopping done early
- get presents for everyone
- find the perfect gift for each person
- prepare enough food
- decorate properly
- go to church
- keep everyone in the family happy
- keep up a happy face but be reverent
- have plenty of sweets on hand but don't eat too much myself
- keep all the familiar traditions going at all costs

Catastrophizing

It would be terrible if...

- something went wrong over the holidays
- I wasn't feeling well during the holidays
- the weather was bad
- we didn't have a white Christmas for the kids
- someone was left out at Christmas time
- I didn't get my cards or presents out on time
- I couldn't afford to buy nice gifts for my family
- _____ (Fill in the blank)

All or Nothing Thinking

If I feel sad at Christmas I am not being a good Christian.
 If I don't decorate for the holidays I am not being a good neighbor.
 If I'm not as happy as everyone else I must be seriously depressed.
 People who don't go all out for the holidays are just like Scrooge.
 The holidays will never be as great as they were in the good old days.
 Thinking about loved ones who are gone will just make the holidays depressing.

COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

Seek out a balance between what is really meaningful for you about the holidays and what you consider to be your obligations during this time. Decide ahead of time a realistic plan for what you can accomplish this season, including how much you can spend, how much you will decorate, socialize, indulge, and otherwise hobnob with humanity.

Participate in those activities you really feel up to -- remember, you don't have to do everything or accept every invitation.

Forgive yourself if things don't turn out perfectly or if you make a mistake.

Forgive others if they don't do it your way or make a mistake.

Allow yourself to grieve if you are experiencing a loss. Don't expect yourself to feel happy every moment. Likewise, don't criticize yourself for enjoying the moment.

Expose yourself to daylight whenever you can but especially in the morning, when you need it to wake up. Open your curtains! If you suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder you may want to purchase light therapy lamps (10,000 lux light). If you are bothered by the darkness and gray of the season, remember that it is temporary. By Christmas morning the days are already getting longer again.

Allow yourself time for rest and exercise. Bundle up and go outside for fresh air even if it's cold. Physical exercise also helps brighten mood and increase energy level. Humans also need more sleep this time of year, so give yourself a little extra time to sleep.

Talking over your stresses and feelings with a close friend, pastor, or professional counselor is a good way to "get a handle" on stress, whatever the season. Writing down your thoughts and reflecting on them can also provide you insight into the problems you are having.

Take "breaks" from Christmas by putting your mind on other things. It's OK to play a different kind of music once in a while.

Doing things for others may get your mind off your own problems.

Have a personal plan for coping with family gatherings. Decide ahead of time how you will approach certain people, what limits you will set on your interactions, what your role will be during the visit, and when to say Goodbye.

Challenge the thinking that stresses you.

- Question the **Shoulds** you place on yourself or that others place upon you.
- Catch your **All or Nothing** thinking and look for some middle ground.
- Avoid **Catastrophizing** when things don't go well. Is it really the end of the world if the holiday wasn't "the greatest?"

Remember, all these holiday traditions we hold so dear and try so hard to follow were once just an idea that someone thought would be fun or important to do.

Maybe this year you will start your own holiday tradition.