

RECOGNIZING AND HANDLING HOLIDAY STRESS MORE EFFECTIVELY

Holidays tend to bring out the best and the worst in us and others around us. The holiday season may trigger thoughts of happiness, fun-filled gatherings, and close and supportive times with family and friends. On the other hand, however, we could also end up focusing on crowded shopping malls, overspending again and then regretting it in January, or on the tension and emotional distress that we feel (or have felt) in the present or past with those who are close to us.

If the holiday season is going to be a positive or, at a minimum, a survivable experience, it makes sense to look closely at the additional stressors that you face during this time of year and to come up with some ideas about how you can deal with them more effectively if and when they arise. Below are listed some of the stressors that you may encounter during the holidays and some suggestions about how to respond differently in the future. See if you can think about and actually put together a more positive plan for yourself and those you care about in the upcoming holiday season. These stressors and the ways you can learn to handle them more effectively can also be part of your *Escalation Prevention Plan* (which this website discusses) as well.

SOME POSSIBLE HOLIDAY STRESSORS FOR YOU TO NOTICE AND THINK ABOUT

HAVING UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

- Of yourself
 - ...having too much to do and too little time to do it
 - ...wanting to provide others with the “perfect” holiday experience/gift/Christmas tree/holiday decorations
 - ...comparing yourself to others who make more money or have more “things” to celebrate the holidays
- Of your partner
 - ...that she/he will be loving, attentive, nurturing, and happy (even if you have been angry and disrespectful with them in the past year)
 - ...that he/she will enjoy and get along with you, your children, and your relatives during the season
 - ...that he/she will have the same needs, wants, and attitudes about the holiday season that you do
 - ...that she/he will do most of the buying of gifts, writing of cards, making the holiday plans, doing the holiday decorating, and cooking the meals and cleaning up afterwards
- Of other family members or friends
 - ...that your children won’t become over-stimulated and “wild” at the gatherings you attend
 - ...that your kids will love their presents and appreciate everything that you are trying to do for them related to the holiday celebration
 - ...that parents, siblings, and in-laws will all “get along” with one another no matter what their relationships are like or what the family history happens to be

- That the holidays will fit the stereotype promoted by the media and the culture (e.g. religious institutions, advertising, shopping malls)
 - ...the “holiday hype” of a “calm, peaceful, and loving time for all”
- That others will treat you in a particular way
 - ...e.g. either that they will be rude and disrespectful **OR** that they will be loving and nurturing
- That this year’s holidays will be worse (or better) than in those in the past

SHOPPING/SPENDING/MONEY

- Trying to decide who to buy for and how much money to spend
- Wanting to find the “perfect” gift for family members and friends
- Spending too much (you and/or your partner) and then becoming depressed and resentful about your over-spending when the bills come due
- Worrying about how much money your partner is spending for the holidays
 - ...and the effect this spending may have on the family budget

YOUR OWN AND OTHERS’ ENERGY AND TIME EXPENDITURE AND OBLIGATIONS THAT OTHERS HAVE FOR YOU OR THAT YOU MAY HAVE FOR YOURSELF

- Constant “busyness,” too many things to do, and too little time to do them
 - ...“looking everywhere” for those “perfect” gifts
 - ...sending out greeting cards and holiday letters (and how honest and open you want to be in them, especially if there are problems in your relationship or in your family)
 - ...attending too many family, work, and other social functions
 - ...having to prepare for gatherings you are actually hosting (e.g. housecleaning, food planning and preparation)
- Expectations that you “absolutely have to” attend family and friends’ parties and work and other social gatherings whether it is convenient or “makes sense” for you or not
 - ...deciding about which parties to attend and how long you will stay there
- Conflict with your partner about whom you will spend time with and when and how this will happen during the holiday season
 - ...rushing around to all the relatives’ homes and feeling harried, overwhelmed, and irritable as a result
 - ...spending time with people you don’t particularly like or who don’t seem to like you
- Having to be around crowds and “mobs” of other holiday shoppers
- Too much travel or “time on the road,” often in difficult and sloppy weather conditions

NOT TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF PHYSICALLY AND NOT GETTING YOUR PERSONAL NEEDS MET

- Doing too much:
 - ...Eating (including lots of refined foods, fats, sugars, and salt)
 - ...Drinking (alcohol)
 - ...Smoking

- ...Partying and attending holiday activities and gatherings
- Doing too little:
 - ...Sleeping
 - ...Exercising
 - ...Relaxing and setting aside time for yourself

GRIEF AND LOSS ISSUES

- Being separated or divorced and missing your children, your partner, or the “family life” you used to have or have enjoyed in the past
- Reflecting back on all the mistakes you have made and the problems that occurred during the past year that may have contributed to additional holiday stress
 - ...feeling pressure “to change everything” and “to be completely different” in the upcoming year
 - ...be especially careful not to set unrealistic New Year’s resolutions for yourself or pressure others to do the same
- The holidays may trigger thoughts about deaths (or other significant losses or events) that have occurred around the holidays in the past
- Thinking back and remembering the good (or bad) times you had around the holidays as a child (which can then influence how you feel about the holidays in the present)

THE WEATHER

- How much snow or rain falls and how cold it is
 - ...making it more difficult to get around and do what you want to accomplish
- The lack of daylight and grey overcast days that can make this a dark, dreary, and depressing time of the year for some people (experiencing “Seasonal Affective Disorder,” i.e. a seasonal and weather-related type of depression)

SOME SPECIFIC IDEAS TO HELP YOU COPE MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH HOLIDAY STRESSES

IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP A CONCRETE PLAN TO HANDLE POTENTIAL HOLIDAY STRESSES (WITH A POSITIVE VS. A NEGATIVE REHEARSAL): BE PROACTIVE!

- Have realistic expectations for yourself, others, and the holiday season itself
 - ...to avoid “setting yourself up” for “let-downs,” disappointments, frustrations, and resentments
- Allow yourself to slow down and take time for yourself to do some things to help you cope with holiday stress and feel good about yourself, your partner, your children, and others
 - ...following your exercise program
 - ...spending special or quiet “connecting time” with your partner, your children, and close friends
 - ...just sitting and resting and “taking a break” occasionally

- Think about how to relax and de-escalate, ahead of time, at family and other social gatherings
...e.g. using time-outs; going out for a walk; calling friends for support, encouragement, and guidance
- “Share the load,” delegate, and ask for assistance when planning and putting on family and other get-togethers and accomplishing holiday tasks that need to get done
...have “pot-luck” style dinners where everyone brings something to share
...ask for help in writing and addressing cards and baking holiday cookies
...allow your children to voice their thoughts and ideas about what they want during the holidays and to be creative in helping them add their own “personal touches” to what happens during this time
- Develop and nurture your own rituals for celebrating the holiday and what is important to you about the holidays and connecting with the special people in your life
...e.g. time with your partner, family, and friends around the Christmas tree; special dinners with friends and family; driving around to look at holiday lights; hiking, skiing, skating or snowshoeing together, watching a favorite holiday movie together, singing Christmas or other carols and songs with family and friends
- Be prepared for large crowds, heavy traffic, long lines, harried and overwhelmed clerks, and not being able to find exactly what you are looking for when you want it
...try to shop at times when there are fewer people who are actually out shopping
...plan to take more time than you might normally need when you go out
...bring along a good book or cards to write when you think you may have to wait somewhere
...use the Internet to order some or all of your gifts
- Be prepared for cold and snowy weather (especially in northern climates)
...plan shopping trips and travel schedules accordingly
...take more time whenever this is necessary

COMMUNICATE, NEGOTIATE, BE ASSERTIVE, SAY “NO” WHEN NECESSARY, AND SET CLEAR AND HEALTHY LIMITS FOR YOURSELF (AND FOR YOUR FAMILY, WHEN NECESSARY)

- Talk about and make conscious decisions about how you will spend time throughout the holidays with family and others
...be assertive with extended family when you need to cut back on activities together
...compromise (e.g. drop by for a shorter visit)
...turn down invitations if you’re feeling completely overwhelmed with just too much to do
- Prepare yourself to be assertive with others in difficult situations that may occur throughout the holiday season
...e.g. figuring out how you will respond to or “stand up for yourself” with a shaming or disrespectful relative or friend at a family or social gathering

RECOGNIZE AND DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH ALL YOUR EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS AS THEY ARISE

- Don’t expect to be happy and “upbeat” at all times during the holiday season
- Take time to think about and feel whatever you happen to be feeling and share your emotional responses with your partner or close friends whenever possible

- Allow yourself to experience and express all the emotions that arise about the present and past holidays
 - ...especially reactions to the anniversary of losses you have experienced (e.g. deaths, a divorce)
- Allow yourself to grieve losses you are experiencing currently
 - ...e.g. being separated from your partner and children or having your children away on their own for the first time; spending holiday time with their partners' families

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF PHYSICALLY

- Get enough sleep and use moderation in eating and drinking
 - ...set limits for yourself about what and how much you will eat and drink at parties
 - ...provide and drink non-alcoholic beverages at get-togethers you or others are giving
 - ...plan parties which include activities not necessarily related to eating or drinking (e.g. caroling, sledding, skating, hiking)

FOCUS ON MAINTAINING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE

- Notice and intervene in thoughts and self-talk that are hostile, blaming, vengeful, judgmental, competitive, and self-defeating
- Look actively for ways to make your holiday season a more positive experience for you and those around you
 - ...even if your current circumstances are not what you would really like them to be
- Think about the “real meaning” of the holidays for you and about how you want your spirituality (however you define this) to be a part of the season
 - ...make conscious decisions about what you want the holidays to be for you and your loved ones even in the face of the “holiday hype” or your own trauma or emotional pain from the present or the past
 - ...make this holiday what you want it to be, including:
 - ...changing parts of it that didn't work for you in the past and
 - ...developing your own special holiday traditions and rituals
 - ...work to develop holiday traditions that help you and other family members feel peaceful, emotionally fulfilled, and emotionally connected to those who are most important to you
- Recognize what you're actually getting done and give yourself credit as you're doing it
 - ...make a list and check things off when you get them accomplished
- Try to think about and see the humor in what happens around you
 - ...work to laugh at what happens rather than “blowing up” or becoming anxious and depressed
- Spend more time with positive people who are nurturing and caring and less time with others who are negative, shaming, and unhealthy for you
 - ...if your family of origin is unavailable either emotionally or physically, make your close friends into your “family” and celebrate the holidays with them
- Allow others to have a positive influence on you during this time
 - ...even if holidays in the past have been difficult or stressful for you
- Cultivate a sense of gratitude within yourself
 - ...focus on appreciating the positive parts of who you are and what you have in your life rather than concentrating on what's not there and “what's missing”

- Volunteer some time over the holidays with others who are less fortunate than you are to help you appreciate what you really do have
...e.g. serving meals at a homeless shelter, volunteering to help neighbors or senior citizens with shoveling or other tasks that need to get done at this time of year

PLAN AND DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH SPENDING AND GIFT-GIVING

- Think about your gift list (to whom and why you give) and come up with other options if that list is becoming overwhelming to you
...e.g. drawing names, setting spending limits
- Don't put pressure on yourself or others to find the "perfect gift" for everyone
...it rarely happens!
- Be creative with your gift-giving, especially when finances are difficult
...present personalized "gift certificates" for specially-prepared lunches or dinners
...provide interesting and fun activities like taking someone to the zoo or a museum or on a "day trip" to a new or interesting location
...offer helpful services like home repair, housecleaning, computer assistance, and snow shoveling to those who need them if you have those sorts of skills in your repertoire
...exchange homemade gifts rather than spending money and buying presents
- Talk to your children directly and honestly about finances if money is "tight" to help them address their own unrealistic expectations about what they feel they should receive for presents
...be aware that they may be comparing what they get with what their friends receive