
Surviving Holiday Stress

The holiday season is rapidly approaching, and our minds race with visions of celebration, family, gifts and yes - *stress*.

Holiday stress is a phenomenon experienced by many of us. While feelings of joy and excitement are an integral part of holiday time, so too are feelings of loss, depression and loneliness. Holiday blues are difficult for people of all ages. So let's try to identify some of the causes for these blues and provide you with creative ways to overcome them.

First, why are holidays difficult for people?

- The romanticized and idealized vision of loving and warm families is often challenged during family gatherings. We experience disappointment when things are not as we wish. Making peace is accepting the reality of our families' strengths and limitations.
- Holidays serve as milestones: what were we doing a year ago at this time? How has my life changed? Is it better, or is it worse? Has anyone that's close to me passed away during that time?
- Due to financial constraints, you may feel upset or angry that you are unable to give the gifts you wish you could give.
- You may be far away or separated from the people you are closest to or you may be alone.

Here are some of the ways we can better handle holiday stress:

- Discussing feelings about the holidays is one way to cope with the stress. Understanding our difficult personal issues enables us to be thoughtful about a solution. It's "O.K." to feel sad during this time. To accept your feelings is healthy.
- Use holiday time and family gatherings to make peace with "strained" family relationships; bury the hatchet.
- Make creative gift giving choices. If your income is limited, consider putting names in a hat and choosing one person to exchange gifts with. Or put a dollar limit on gifts.
- Learn to say no. Don't agree to go to that New Year's Eve party when you'd rather be in bed watching a favorite old movie. However, be prepared to be flexible- you finished your holiday shopping in October but agree to go to the mall with your younger sister (even though you hate the crowds) because it will make her happy. Remember to compromise when necessary, and use positive communication.
- Take care of yourself. Do what is most pleasing to you despite your family's potential disapproval.
- Call for help. Your EAP is only one toll free call away; you can talk to a professional counselor about your specific concerns. Reaching out is a stress-busting tool.

Above all, remember that holiday stress is temporary - it usually lasts just a few weeks. The stress dissipates once we return to our daily routines.