

MORE JOY, LESS STRESS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays are a time of gathering with friends and loved ones, giving and receiving gifts, going the extra mile to decorate, shop and fit everything in. It's no wonder that the holidays bring stress to your life with added activities and pressure in your already busy life. You can be left with feelings of anxiety, resentment, anger and even sadness.

There are things you can do to lessen your holiday burden. It will not likely take away all the stress, but when you are honest with yourself about what you want for your holidays, you can better find the middle ground. The following list can help you do just that.

- 1. Be realistic and prioritize.** Make a list of activities, parties and traditions that are on the calendar and prioritize them. Focus on a few of the activities and/or traditions that are most important to you and set your limits on the others.
- 2. Stay flexible!** Last-minute changes are inevitable. A relative who was responsible for bringing the side dishes may cancel at the last minute. Breathe, stay in the moment, and move into action to figure out Plan B.
- 3. Ask for and find support.** If you are anxious from too many activities, missing a loved one who has died or lives far away, or are feeling angry that you have to spend more money than you want, realize that it's normal to feel this way. You can't always be happy just because it's the holiday season. It's important, however, to reach out to others and talk about how you feel. They can provide support and companionship. You may even realize that you're not alone.
- 4. Delegate.** Find yourself some elves. The decorations, the food you cook, and your house—they don't all have to be perfect. Cut back on the decorations or have a family member take over the task. Get help in the kitchen or order from your local grocery store or bakery. And if your house isn't spotless, it's OK. Your family and friends won't even notice.
- 5. Play relaxing holiday music often,** especially when you're doing chores at home. You may find that the chores don't seem like chores at all. And you just might get more done than you expected.
- 6. Get along with everyone** as best you can by making a decision to exercise healthy boundaries. Family dynamics can be a mixed blessing. Be aware of how a family member may intentionally or unintentionally cause you stress. Avoid conversations about touchy subjects that will only lead to heightened emotions and stress levels. Realize that you are not responsible for what people say or do. You cannot control others' actions, but you can control your response to them.

- 7. Don't be afraid to let go of traditions.** As families change due to divorce and remarriage or as children age, traditions will change. Be open to letting traditions go so there can be room for new ones. Your grown children won't always be able to be with you for the holidays. Instead, invite friends to your home or dine at a restaurant. With an open mind, you'll be surprised what new traditions develop.
- 8. Start early and don't overspend.** Match your gift giving with your budget, then stick to it. Instead of buying gifts for everyone in your extended family, see if they would like to draw names instead. Chances are they are feeling the same financial and time pressures, and they would love the idea. Consider giving a smaller gift that is personal and meaningful. The receiver will know that you truly thought about them. And start early! Waiting until the last minute only leaves you feeling pressure and stress. You'll be more likely to overspend and, well, to head for the cookie jar!
- 9. Make a schedule.** If you're having company, schedule times for food shopping, baking, buying gifts, setting the table and other chores. Show your schedule to your spouse or other family member to be sure you haven't forgotten anything. If you stick to your schedule, you won't be stressed at the last minute doing things you forgot about.
- 10. Don't be afraid to say, NO.** This is heard often, yet it's difficult to do. Your life will feel much less cluttered if you try not to commit to too many activities. Know your limits. If at all possible, only do what you really want to do.
- 11. Do one act of kindness, no matter how small.** Charity opportunities are abundant during the holidays. Don't overthink which ones to become involved with, and end up stressed over it. Do something as simple as participating in a toy drive or volunteering at a collection site. You'll really feel that sense of gratitude.
- 12. Let go of expectations.** Just as it's your challenge to prioritize and decide what's important to you during the holidays, it's also your job to stay in the moment and be realistic. When we let the little things bother us, we end up with a snow bank of stress. Realizing the stress is building before it grows can help. Also, breaking it down into individual snowflakes can make it seem not so insurmountable.
- 13. Take care of YOU.** Be sure to get enough sleep, continue or start an exercise routine, limit caffeine and alcohol. You can allow yourself a few indulgences with the holiday treats, but don't overdo it. We tend to overeat more when we're stressed which makes exercising, eating right and getting enough sleep very important during the holidays. You'll feel better and have more energy.
- 14. Give yourself a gift this holiday season.** Did you exclude yourself from your holiday gift list? Brainstorm something you would like. Treat yourself to a massage, a movie, that pair of shoes you've wanted. Or maybe it's a daily gift of time. Taking some quiet time can make all the difference. Go for a walk, listen to soothing music, meditate, do some yoga, take a bath, sip on a hot cup of tea. Do something you enjoy.
- 15. Embrace the wonder of the season.** No amount of stress can steal away the wonder of any season. Take time to notice and be present in the very things that make any holiday important to you. Make the choice to be joyful. Whether it's setting up a tree or a menorah, turning on holiday lights, or belting out that favorite holiday song in your car when no one else can hear. *'Tis the season!*