

An Ounce of Prevention

Complimentary

December 2016

Issue 240

Printed by:

Gary J. Meiers, Ph. D., Jo Ann Hammond, Ph. D.,
& Associates, Ltd.
10009 – 85 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T6E 2J9



Website: drsgaryjoannmeierspsychologist.com

Phone: (780) 433-2269

Fax: (780) 431-0463

E-Mail: psychrec@telusplanet.net

Holidays Got You Down? Try These Things to Help

You're not alone if you're not exactly feeling in the holiday spirit this year. Too many crowds, too much Christmas music, too many family obligations. You eat and drink like there's tomorrow, but then have to wake up the next morning anyway.

It can all be a bit too much. The holidays can get us down, but we can also fight back. So how exactly do you fight back?

Kick the Stress

You can kick the holiday stress by doing as much planning as possible. Plan your time with extended family, plan who's cooking what day, and where you need to be on which day. The more you schedule things (and stick to that schedule!), the more likely you won't be stressed out by having to make a dozen last-minute decisions.

Now is the time to do those things you've done in the past that help you successfully deal with stress. If you like to exercise to keep the stress at bay, make sure you keep to your regimen as much as possible. If you like to get a massage, now's the perfect time of year to get one. In short, stick to the coping skills you like to use and that work best for you.

Don't put off using them because "there's no time," or "I have to be there for others." You can't be there for others if you don't take care of your needs first.

Remember that Moderation is Best

It's easy to go overboard with everything during the holidays. We tell ourselves, "Hey, I deserve this" or "One more helping won't really hurt anything." We feel like it'll help the stress if we have one (or two, or three) extra drinks to help deal with our family. But overdoing it rarely helps anything, and makes us feel worse in the long run.

Yeah, it's a pain to stick to eating a healthy diet and not over-indulging during the holidays. So do this instead: allow yourself one extra helping at one meal a day, or one extra drink or dessert. Giving yourself an allowance for a little extra ahead of time can help you keep to reasonable limits, while still allowing yourself to enjoy the holidays.

Don't Try to Change Anything Big

Now's not the time to start a new diet, a new routine, or try out a new personality. Sticking to what's worked in the past is usually best, with a few little tweaks here and there to help make things even better. You can, of course, always try and change things for the better. But it's wiser to do so in little bits and pieces, not all at once.

Want to improve your relationship with a family member? Take baby steps to work on more clearly communicating with them without snark, sarcasm, or bringing up past embarrassments or hurts. Actions speak louder than words, so no need to tell others you're working on improving these things — just do it.

Prepare for the Tense or Awkward Situations

A good offense is the best defense, the saying goes. So if you prepare ahead of time for such situations by setting realistic expectations and work to minimize conflict with others. I love the advice given here:

If your mother-in-law — you know, the one who tends to push your buttons — is staying with you for several days, figure out how you'll approach her when she inevitably hits a nerve, Taliaferro said. Let's say she criticizes your parenting. When she makes a comment, Taliaferro said, you might reply: "I love how much you care about the kids," and "recognize her intention, which really is about caring for the kids." Or you might say: "Thank you for respecting my parenting style. I know sometimes that's hard to do."

It may also help to give yourself some alone-time after interacting with a particularly unhelpful family member. Excuse yourself and go for a nice brisk walk outside to help clear your head and re-establish your calm.

~By John M. Grohol, Psy.D.

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/12/22/holidays-got-you-down-try-these-things-to-help/>

6 Ways to Get Through the Holidays

I feel guilty writing that: "getting through the holidays." I've done an excellent job this year of scheduling events that will force my brain

to appreciate the magic of the holiday season: I actually participated in a cookie swap even though sugar makes me suicidal; I made time last week to attend a friend's holiday concert and to celebrate afterwards; and I even went to the Nutcracker ballet with my daughter last weekend.

However, now that the kids are home for two weeks, and snowball cookies (you know, the balls covered in powdered sugar) are lying around, I know I'm in the danger zone. The 14-days ahead of me are critical mental health days where I must reach for any and all discipline that lies inside me.

Here is my plan:

1. Avoid sugar and white flour. To avoid sugar and white flour during the holidays sounds, I know, like avoiding snow in January. But I don't need to read the research about how unbalanced blood sugar levels affect your mood, or how simple carbs use up mood enhancing B vitamins, or how sugar consumption triggers chronic inflammation, or how sugar suppresses activity of a key growth hormone in the brain called BDNF. I don't need to read the abstract by British psychiatric researcher Malcolm Peet, who conducted a provocative cross-cultural analysis of the relationship between diet and mental illness and found that there was a strong link between high sugar consumption and the risk of both depression and schizophrenia.

I don't need to read the studies because I know that every time I put something made with sugar or white flour in my mouth, I want to die. I experience death thoughts. I can't afford to fight those during Christmas, so I'm staying away from the cookie tray and the pies.

2. Exercise. When I miss even one day of aerobic exercise, I face the unpleasant consequences of fighting death thoughts. So I plan on getting up before the kids on Christmas morning and riding the stationary bike, getting my heart rate up to 135 beats per minute for at least 60 minutes, the quota that I have found that works to shut the thoughts down.

Volumes of research point to the benefits of exercise for mood, such as the study led by Dr. James A. Blumenthal, a professor of medical psychology at Duke University. He discovered that, among the 202 depressed people randomly assigned to various treatments, three sessions of vigorous aerobic exercise were approximately as effective at treating depression as daily doses of Zoloft, when the treatment effects were measured after four months.

3. Pray. There was a time at the beginning of the year where I was meditating 15 or 20 minutes day. Not now. My mind is too distracted and panicked. But I pray. I pray constantly.

I start with the Prayer of St. Francis, "Make me an instrument of your peace." Sometimes I just pray that over and over again. Or I will pray the rosary. Or, if I'm without words, I will just hold it. Or repeat a mantra of two, "Everything passes," or "I am okay," or "Peace be with me."

4. Get Support. Maybe I'm fretting this year's holiday season less than the ones in the past now that I have an online support group, Group Beyond Blue, that is there when I it. Research shows that support groups aid the recovery of a person struggling with depression and decrease chances of relapse.

The New England Journal of Medicine published a study in December of 2001 in which 158 women with metastatic breast cancer were assigned to a supportive-expressive therapy. These women showed greater improvement in psychological symptoms and reported less pain than the women with breast cancer who were assigned to the control group with no supportive therapy.

Brainstorm with your friend on ways to get more support. Research and share with your friend various groups (online or in town) that might be of benefit.

5. Make a Plan If you're wiggled out about spending Christmas dinner with a relative or two who seems to know your trigger button and likes to hit it every time he sees you for giggles and kicks, then do some preemptive planning before your dinner. You would be

wise to start strategizing before the doorbell rings about where you are going to sit, what conversations you will have, how you will respond to sensitive issues, and boring questions you can ask to fill the uncomfortable voids. You might invent five or so canned retorts to be used when unjustly interrogated, or compile a list of necessary exit plans should you reach the about-to-lose-it-in-a-big-way point. Visualizations can also help. For example, picture yourself inside a bubble, with an invisible layer protecting you from the toxic stuff on the outside.

6. Repeat: It's Not About Me You think it's about you when your brother calls you a "selfish, lazy, son of a something," but actually it's not. He may point his finger at you and say, "You. I'm talking about you." But he's really not. He is seeing something that has nothing to do with who you are. Don Miguel Ruiz says this in his classic book, "The Four Agreements": "What they say, what they do, and the opinions they give are according to the agreements they have in their own minds... Taking things personally makes you easy prey for these predators, the black magicians... But if you do not take it personally, you are immune in the middle of hell." That's good news for all of us who make a habit of taking everything personally. It frees us to be ourselves, even when charged with a character flaw backed by supposed evidence.

By Therese J. Borchard, Associate Editor

<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/12/14/6-ways-to-get-through-the-holidays/>

Making Happy Changes in Your Holidays

The holiday season has started and I'm often reminded of an elderly friend of mine. Whenever someone said "Have a happy holiday!" she always replied, "No, make it one." She was right, of course. Happy holidays don't just happen. Holidays are what we make them.

The great thing about annual events is that each year is an opportunity for a do-over. We can slide into a rerun or we can make it be different. If something about the family traditions is no longer working (or never did), we do have some say in what happens next.

"How?" you ask. Whether you want to make some minor adjustments or do an extreme makeover, it starts with each of us. A family is an ecological system. When even one person makes a change, everyone else has to respond in some way.

Sometimes how family members react is a pleasant surprise. They are relieved that someone took the lead to make some changes. Other times – not so much. People don't like to be made uncomfortable and change, even good change, can be jarring. Nonetheless, if we do it kindly and calmly, a positive shift in how things are done can eventually be accepted and enjoyed.

Three Rules for Making Change

1. Start with yourself.

The most important thing to remember is that we can't make anyone else be different. All we can do is resolve that we ourselves will do something differently. There is no point in arguing, cajoling or even reasoning if people are resistant to an idea. Instead, find a way to announce a small change you are going to make and stick to it – without rancor or a superior attitude.

Lydia, a former client, did this well. Her family had a tradition of being extravagant with each other, often spending money they didn't really have in order to show love. Last year, she announced to everyone that she simply couldn't afford to do what had always been expected. Instead, she was going to make each member of the family a handmade something to show how much she loved and appreciated them.

One sister groused, "It's unfair that you're going to make me cookies when I'm giving you something expensive." To which Lydia replied, "It's up to you what you can afford to give me. I can give you something that takes my time. I hope you'll like it."

Imagine her surprise when one by one, most of the family followed suit. "It turned out to be the best Christmas yet," she later reported to me. "Some people who really do have more money than time stuck with the over-the-top expensive presents. But most of the family put real thought into making things or bought things that didn't break the bank. Several of the cousins thanked me for sparing them the January bills."

2. Plan ahead.

Lydia was successful because she gave people plenty of notice. There was time for people to talk about the change and to get used to the idea. People hadn't yet done their shopping so weren't inconvenienced. Matt, a friend of mine, also made a difference by planning ahead.

Matt was never happy with the hectic pace of Christmas Day. Somehow he and his wife had fallen into the pattern of opening presents with the kids in the morning, then loading them up into the car for a two-hour ride to his folks' where there was another round of gift-giving. By the end of the day, the kids were cranky and tired and he and his wife were, well, cranky and tired.

One year he told his parents (in the most loving way possible) that they just couldn't do it all in one day anymore. No one was having the fun that everyone wanted to have. He proposed a second Christmas at the grandparents' house on the weekend after Christmas.

It worked. Everyone was rested. The kids didn't resent leaving their new toys to go to Grandma's. They weren't overwhelmed by a marathon of opening presents at two houses. Everyone had a much better time.

It took awhile for Matt's folks to get used to the idea that Christmas doesn't have to happen on the 25th. But when they saw that everyone was much more relaxed and happy, they came to agree that two Christmases really were better than one.

3. Be positive.

Family members are much more likely to accept change if it is presented as a positive. Resist the temptation to explain (or complain about) all the ways that the family's traditions are wrong, dysfunctional, or burdensome. It's important to remember that people are attached to traditions, even traditions that have outlived their usefulness,

So — don't go at it as an argument. Instead, talk about all the ways you think a change would be a happier way to celebrate the season and each other. Simply and calmly point out the positive reasons for changing things up a bit. Perhaps the change will make it more possible to see certain people. Maybe it will reduce expenses or stress. Perhaps it will honor changes in people's health or age or ability.

For over 40 years, Tully's mom had cooked an elaborate ethnic meal for 12 or more people on Christmas Eve. A couple of years ago, he became aware that (being 78) she looked exhausted by the time dinner was served.

During the summer, he had a talk with her about how important it is to make sure that traditions are passed down to the next generation. He asked her to help make sure that family recipes aren't lost by writing them down and sending them out to different family members to bring for the annual Christmas dinner. She protested that of course she could do it. She always had. Tully avoided that argument, instead stressing the positive: She could be in charge. The younger people needed to learn. It would be fun. She reluctantly agreed.

Last Christmas was the first "potluck" of family recipes. It turned out great. The food wasn't quite the same but everyone was happy with how much more present their mom could be during the meal. Even she was willing to acknowledge that she was having more fun: But Sara needed to add more salt to her dish and Serina really had been too stingy with butter and. . . It was okay. Everyone let her critique the meal. Part of the point was to learn how to make the dishes "right."

It's not simple but changes can be made in family holiday traditions. Making a happy holiday means starting to do something about it yourself, advance planning, and, above all, doing it with the kindness that is the spirit of the season.

Happy Holidays, everyone!

~ By Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed.D.

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/making-happy-changes-in-your-holidays/>

Merry Hanukkah
Happy Christmas



Self- Help Corner:

Alcoholics Anonymous:	780-424-5900
Al-Anon/Alateen:	780-433-1818
Support Network / Referral Line:	211
Distress Line:	780-482-4357
Cocaine Anonymous:	780-425-2715

Informative Links:

The National Women's Health Information Center:
<http://4woman.gov>