

## Stress, Depression and Holidays: 12 Tips for Coping

For some of us, the holidays bring unwelcome guests – stress and depression. And it's no wonder. In an effort to pull off a perfect Hallmark holiday, we might find ourselves facing a dizzying array of demands.....work, parties, shopping, baking, cleaning, caring for elderly parents or kids on school break, and scores of other chores. So much for the peace and joy, right?

Actually, with some practical tips, we can minimize the stress and depression that often accompany the holidays. We may even end up enjoying the holidays more than we thought we would.

### The trigger points of holiday stress and depression

Holiday stress and depression are often the result of three main trigger points. Understanding these trigger points can help us plan ahead on how to accommodate them.

The three main trigger points of holiday stress or depression:

- ★ **Relationships.** Relationships can cause turmoil, conflict or stress at any time. But tensions are often high during the holidays. Family misunderstandings and conflicts can intensify, especially if you're all thrust together for several days. Often family members have different personalities, needs and interests. On the other hand, if you are facing the holidays without a loved one, you may find yourself especially lonely or sad.
- ★ **Finances.** Like our relationships, our financial situation can cause stress at any time of the year. But overspending during the holidays on gifts, travel, food and entertainment can increase stress as we try to make ends meet while making everyone on our gift list happy. That kind of a financial spiral may leave us with depression symptoms such as hopelessness, sadness and helplessness.
- ★ **Physical Demands.** The strain of shopping, attending social gatherings and preparing holiday meals can wipe you out. Feeling exhausted increases stress, creating a vicious cycle. Exercise and sleep - good antidotes for stress and fatigue – may take a back seat to chores and errands. High demands, stress, lack of exercise, and overindulgence in food and drink - are all ingredients for holiday illness.

## 12 Tips to Prevent Holiday Stress and Depression

When stress is at its peak, it is hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress in the first place, especially if you know the holidays have taken an emotional toll in the past.

Tips you can try to head off holiday stress and depression:

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If a loved one is ill or has died or you aren't able to be with your loved ones, realize that it is normal to feel sadness or grief. It's OK now and then to take time just to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
2. **Seek support.** If you feel isolated or down, seek out family and friends, or your friends and church family at St. James. Consider community social services, hospice groups etc. They can offer support and companionship. Consider volunteering. Getting involved and helping others can lift your spirits. Ask help for organizing holiday gatherings, meal preparation and cleanup. You don't have to go it alone. Don't be a martyr.

3. **Be realistic.** As families grow and change, traditions and rituals often change as well. Hold on to those you can and want to. But accept that you may have to let go of others. For example, if your adult children and grandchildren can't all gather at your house as usual, find new ways to celebrate together from afar, such as sharing pictures, e-mails or videotapes.
4. **Set differences aside.** Be accepting of family and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Practice forgiveness. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. Be understanding if others get upset when something goes awry. Chances are they are feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.
5. **Stick to a budget.** Before you go shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend on gifts and other items. Then stick to that budget. If you don't, you could feel anxious and tense for months afterward while struggling to pay the bills. You cannot buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.
6. **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make one big food-shopping trip. It will help save the environment and prevent last-minute forgotten ingredients. Do expect travel delays, especially if you are flying.
7. **Learn to say no.** Believe it or not, people will understand if you cannot do certain projects. If you say yes only to what you really want to do, you will avoid feeling resentful, bitter and overwhelmed.
8. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a dietary free-for-all. Re-read the helpful dietary hints in the Nov-Dec Episcopalian. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Continue to get plenty of sleep and schedule time for physical activity.
9. **Take a breather.** Make time for yourself. Refresh yourself with just 15 minutes alone, without distractions. Steal away to a quiet place, even if the only place is the bathroom. Take a walk, gaze at the stars, listen to soothing music. Clear your mind, slow your breathing and restore your inner calm.
10. **Rethink resolutions.** Unrealistic resolutions can set you up for failure. Don't resolve to change your whole life. Instead, set smaller, more specific goals with a reasonable time frame. Choose only resolutions that help you feel valuable and that provide more than only fleeting moments of happiness.
11. **Forget about perfection.** Holiday TV specials are filled with happy endings. But in real life, people don't usually resolve problems within a 2 hour time slot. Something always comes up. Remember Murphy's Law and accept imperfections in yourself and in others.
12. **Seek Professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, if you are persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable, feel hopeless and unable to face routine chores, and these symptoms last several weeks, speak to a doctor or a mental health professional. It could be depression.

Know that holidays can trigger stress. Accept that things are not always going to go as planned. Take active steps to manage stress and you may actually enjoy the holidays.

Your St. James Parish Health Ministry Team wishes you a Season of Love, Joy, and Peace.

