

## Holiday Stress:

### How to Enjoy the Holidays and Enjoy your Family at the Same Time

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#### *Why are holidays such a stressful time?*

Holidays - whether we are talking about Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, or other family celebrations - can be a stressful time for a number of reasons. First, people hold expectations and hopes that holiday times will be full of love, harmony, closeness and connection within the family. We all share this hope and this dream. This expectation is reinforced by heart-warming movie classics such as "It's a Wonderful Life," "Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street," and more recently, "The Family Man." These movies provide ideals of complicated family situations that are resolved in glorious and life-transforming ways, right in front of our eyes, in less than 2 hours. We all want closeness, acceptance and warmth. . . especially within our families, and especially during holidays. Sometimes our reality conflicts with our expectations.

#### *However, our unrealistic expectations may set us up for frustration and disappointment*

Experts tell us this highly romanticized expectation can actually be a set-up. That is, a set-up for disappointment and frustration for anything "less than perfect" during this "magical" time. In reality, most families are dealing with multiple complicated situations. Such things as many people traveling great and small distances over many days and weeks, or addressing health changes in our loved ones or ourselves. We face many people sharing multiple nights under the same roof, or blended families and re-blended families and re-blended-again families, or many mini-celebrations throughout the holiday season (parties at work, celebrations at school, gatherings at our synagogues and churches) - which adds to the tension. Families with caregiving issues, such as a parent with dementia who isn't able to participate in the same ways as past years is a complication. Or caring for someone who is spending holidays in a nursing home. For a wife caring for husband with long-term care needs, likely missing the holidays of the past. For an adult child who may be now caring for mom, taking the lead with the holiday meals instead of how mom always did it is an adjustment. And of course, we all have the run-of-the-mill holiday activities of shopping, baking cookies, planning meals, and preparing meals. This doesn't even include the family gatherings we want to make special, memorable, meaningful and significant. That's the set-up.

#### *How can we enjoy the time we have during the holidays?*

Family therapists tell us to have a realistic expectation: the intensity of the holiday togetherness may be stressful. You and others may feel irritable at times. Take this in your stride as "the way things are" instead of fighting against it, or blaming yourself or someone else for being "bad." Use your sense of humor to soften mishaps.

Recognize that no one can live up to our expectations of the heavily romanticized picture most of have of the holidays. In the holiday "dream," we feel pressured to be warm, bright and create good feelings all the time. It's just not possible without creating unbearable tension.

**Tips for managing & enjoying yourself and your family this year**

- Give yourself and everyone else permission to feel less than perfect.
- Plan for the difficult moments. Keep lots of distractors handy, such as board games, photo albums, walking routes or other activities.
- Try to be flexible.
- Think of the holidays as a time to make a few meaningful contacts - not as a time to resolve a family issue or upsetting situation or unexpressed frustration between you and your loved one.
- The motto "Everything in Moderation" is a great guide. Temptations are abundant throughout the season---alcohol, sweets and rich food. This goes for holiday celebrations and family gatherings, too. Go ahead. Have some. Just don't over-indulge.
- Laugh a lot. Look for the humor in situations.
- Consider taking a daily and weekly break, to do something just for you. Planning ahead for these times is key.
- If you are a caregiver, think ahead to avoid problems. Elders and others in need of care will likely fatigue faster and have a smaller frustration tolerance for non-routine activities. Smaller doses of holiday fun (even as short as 15-30 minutes) may result in a better visit than longer ones.
- Or, consider even arranging for some respite care for your loved one.

It can be done. You can care for your loved ones and your family, attend to your daily activities, and enjoy the holidays. We all do what we can, and nobody needs to expect more than that from us. Especially us. Happy Holidays.

Primary sources: 1) Marano (1998). Psychology Today. 2) Plontz (2002). [www.caregiver.com/articles/holiday\\_stress.htm](http://www.caregiver.com/articles/holiday_stress.htm). Column written by Suzann Ogland-Hand, PhD, clinical geropsychologist at Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, and representative for Caregiver Resource Network, a collaboration of Kent County organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Please send your caregiving questions to [suzann.ogland-hand@pinorest.org](mailto:suzann.ogland-hand@pinorest.org), and look for the Caregiver's Corner in the Advance Newspapers Mature Lifestyles magazine.