



Managing Family Stress During the Holidays

Taking care of others starts with taking care of yourself

BY MICHELLE KELLEY

The holidays will soon be here again. Does the thought excite you? Irritate you? Fill you with childlike anticipation or just dread? Well, most people experience a whole range of emotions surrounding the holidays, and those thoughts can be difficult to sort through. The holidays are supposed to be a time of festive parties, family traditions, peace, and joy. For many, however, getting together with family can cause a lot of stress and can trigger intense family drama.

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Research has discovered that approximately three-quarters of people have stated at least one person in their family is annoying. The difficulty arises when interaction with this person or people causes old childhood wounds to resurface and intense emotions to flare. This scenario is particularly visible during the holidays when families get together. Learning how to deal with difficult family members as well as learning to manage your own emotions is the key to having an enjoyable holiday season.



Tips for Managing Holiday Family Stress

AIM FOR "GOOD ENOUGH."

Often the holidays are a time when perfectionist tendencies arise. Practice letting go of the idea that everything has to look and be perfect. Embrace your humanity and know your limits. A perfectly wrapped present is not mandatory. A thoughtful gift that comes from the heart is much more meaningful, no matter the package it is in.

KNOW YOURSELF. If you love parties, great! Go to as many as you like, but please be mindful of other family members who may feel otherwise. It's okay to leave them at home if that is their choice. I am not a big partygoer. I am an introvert. This quality does not make me a party pooper, but parties do tire me out. Because the experience leaves me quite drained, I have learned to say "no, thank you" without feeling guilty.

HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS. Women typically are in charge of all aspects of family gatherings, from the planning to the execution. Many women tend to over-schedule themselves and their families, which can lead to an enormous amount of

stress. It's okay and necessary to say "no" at times: "No we can't make it to your party. No, I can't host Thanksgiving this year." Offering an alternative softens the conversation and allows you to feel more in control. For example, "Even though I won't be able to make your party, I would love to have lunch with you after the holidays." Or "We'd be happy to bring the desserts this year, what's your favorite pie?" It's important to know your limits and only offer what is realistic for you and your family. Remember that others may be upset, disappointed or even angry with your decision. I always tell my clients: "You are not responsible for other people's emotions." While this might be hard to process, it's important to allow people to have their feelings, and to resist the urge to jump in and rescue them. No one dies from disappointment.

SET REALISTIC FAMILY TRADITIONS. Family traditions are important, but they can quickly begin to feel like a burden and cause you to become overwhelmed. It's better to stick to one or two special traditions; more is not necessarily better, in fact, it can dilute the real meaning of these traditions. For new families, the holidays are a wonderful time to

create your own traditions. Let the extended family know how exciting and important it is for you and yours to create these personal memories.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION LIGHT.

We all know to avoid certain topics in group settings. Family get togethers are no exception. The obvious exchanges to steer clear of are religion and politics, but you know your family well and can navigate those exchanges best. Still, if you feel trapped and do not know how to escape an uncomfortable conversation, say something like: "Actually I think this is a discussion for another day." Remember, even if it is unpleasant, it's normal if others get upset with you for setting boundaries.

EVADE FAMILY DRAMA. The very best advice is don't get involved. Let it go. Don't allow yourself to be offended. Excuse yourself from the room, go play with a niece or nephew, go help in the kitchen, and if all else fails go to the store to pick up something. Family dynamics can be challenging, so always be emotionally prepared before you arrive. This may include talking to someone about your concerns or the situations that trigger you. Do some roleplaying with a person you trust to help

you navigate certain comments or situations that may come up. Know who will be there. Unpleasant surprises are never good.

IMPLEMENT A SELF-CARE PLAN.

During the holidays it is easy to focus on others and stop taking care of your personal needs. You can also get caught up in party-going, partake in too much sugar or alcohol, and not provide yourself with enough sleep. It is a recipe for personal disaster. Make sure one of your gifts this holiday season is the gift of giving yourself what YOU need – whether that's a nice long walk with the dog or quiet time with a cherished relative. Taking care of others starts with taking care of yourself. So enjoy the holidays but be realistic and expect that there will be disappointments, frustrations, and challenging situations and people. Keep in mind that your behavior acts as a model for your children, and how successfully you cope with the holidays can be the very best gift you could ever give your kids. ❖



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