

Tips to cope with holiday stress

Holidays are supposed to be a break from everyday routine, a chance to spend some relaxing time with our families. Why, then, do most of us feel so exhausted afterwards?

Part of the problem is that we're still haunted by a "greeting card" approach to the holidays. Many of us want to spend more time with our families doing all of those wonderful holiday things. Determined to have the "perfect" family holiday, we end up tripping all over our good intentions, ensnaring those we love in the process.

High expectations can block out the real picture.

A major contributor to holiday stress is the wide gap that develops between expectations that are too high and what's actually attainable in our situation. Instead, we need to concentrate on what's most important to us.

Take time before the holidays to talk with your children about their expectations. For instance, if your family decides that spending time together is the most important thing, you may have to cut back on some activities. This may mean fewer sleep-overs at friends' homes for the kids or fewer parties for the parents.

Another hurdle many families face over the holidays is planning visits with relatives — determining whom to see and when. This decision can become even more complex when both parents' relatives live close by, or parents are separated or divorced. Trying to satisfy everyone concerned is a difficult task and can result in anxious moments for adults and children alike.

Though your family can't be in two places at once, you can be fair in how you divide your time. Deal with the situation before feelings may be hurt by having an advance arrangement about when visits will occur — and then rotate the schedule each year to give equal time to each party. If you have many relatives living close by, plan one special night for everyone to get together.

In these uncertain economic times, the old adage of "be thankful for what you have" still rings true. Many parents find it helpful to talk with older children about how money is to be spent to avoid disappointment later.

If you can't afford to spend as much money on presents this year, you can place emphasis elsewhere, such as helping out others within your community. For instance, your family can drop off toys or food at a local charity. This will certainly add a warm glow to your holiday and help your family reflect on what is good about your own situation.

Another way to get extra mileage out of a limited budget is with homemade gifts. You can give gifts like a specially-wrapped jar of homemade cookies (with recipe attached) to someone on your list.

Those with large, extended families may find it helpful to have a draw where each family member picks one name for whom he or she will buy a present.

Like many parents today, you will also have to deal with your children's wish list. You can help younger children understand that they may not receive exactly what they want by taking a trip to the store with them.

You may be surprised at how quickly they can change their minds about what they want once they see that the toy is actually a lot smaller, and much less exciting, than the one advertised.

Take advantage of the holidays to do something you don't normally have time to do. Schedule some personal "time-outs" for yourself.

With two-income families, no one person should be shouldering the majority of the workload around the house. Have all family members participate in some way. Your child might be an "undiscovered" chef for instance and enjoy helping you bake.

Not dealing with small disappointments and anxieties will put a damper on your family's holiday spirit while fanning the flames for high stress. Take some of the steps that I've outlined to help both you and your family better cope with all the excitement and anticipation that the holidays bring — and have a wonderful time together!

MANAGING FAMILY STRESS

with DR. RICHARD EARLE



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