

HOLIDAY STRESS

Dr. Heidi Lilienthal

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents."

-- Jo March (Louisa May Alcott)

It is interesting that a recent radio talk show reported that one of the "best" children's books this year is entitled *Too Many Toys* -- something about a youngster having too many toys so they just sit in their room and don't play with any of them. Yes indeed, an interesting sign of our times.

There are many reasons why most people find the holiday season stressful. Holiday stressors may be triggered by and also trigger various types of stress and emotional pain. A seemingly simple example is holiday eating. The holidays are associated with special foods and lots of eating! Unfortunately, many people cope with stress by increasing their food intake or by obsessing about weight and food intake. The combination of factors regarding food that culminate around the holidays is often problematic for many. The cycle of sometimes negative patterns triggered by the holiday season may also be experienced with other activities such as alcohol and/or drug use, increased and often "out of control" spending, speeding around in cars to hurry and scurry, and so on.

Increased pressure on time is a common experience during the holiday season. Many extra events crammed into the same 24 hours often leads to deficiencies in sleep, increases in "junk" food consumption to save time, and increase in absenteeism from work. "Not surprisingly, the Christmas holidays are the height of the flu season," writes Sarah Ban Breathnach, author of *Simple Abundance*. Yes, once again we have scientific evidence that stress affects the physical body in many harmful ways.

What about the more subtle or less talked about stress factors of the holiday season? What impact do the holidays have on the psyche? Well, the Holmes-Rahe Stressful Events Checklist lists celebrating a holiday as a "stressful life event." The holidays often involve either:

- A) visits to family or friends (which may produce happy or aggravating stress -- both affect us)
- B) for some, isolation and lack of appropriate support becomes more apparent during the holiday season -- depression, anxiety, and other psychological symptoms may increase
- C) memories of past holiday experiences are very often triggered by the holiday hoopla (again, may be positive or negative memories)

In some way, we are all affected by this time of year (no matter what our religious affiliation). At the very least, everyone is affected by increased time spent in the check-out line at the store. I once heard a suggestion by someone who did not wish to "participate" in the holidays. He suggested that there be a special "non-participator" line at each store so that people who just want their gallon of milk can get it without waiting forever.

Well, instead of us all becoming "non-participators" or simply continuing to "suffer through" what is meant to be a joyful time, here are a few suggestions for decreasing holiday stress:

1) PLAN AHEAD:

Try to get various tasks completed before the holiday rush. (too late for that one? Keep reading.)

2) PRIORITIZE:

Since "everything" will probably not get done "perfectly," decide what really matters. Do you really need to bake cookies for everyone in the Western Hemisphere? Or would wearing a smile all day and giving someone a "cut" in line at the post office or bank be just as meaningful? (Besides, rest assured, those extra calories will find other ways to our loved ones!)

3) LET GO:

In addition to prioritizing tasks for the holidays, just simply let go of as many tasks as possible. With each task you remove from your self-imposed to do list, notice the surge of relief and joy envelope you!

4) GET SUPPORT:

Support from other people (and pets) is probably THE most effective intervention no matter what the stressor. From illness to school stress to work re-organization stress, support is significantly effective in making the difference for many! Just read many of the articles in the *Journal of Human Stress* (another sign of our times -- an entire scientific journal devoted to stress!) So, whether it is support in maintaining sobriety, staying on a healthy diet, or scheduling for someone to be with you so you are not alone on the holidays -- get some support!

5) REMEMBER THE REASON:

No matter what one's religious affiliation, a time of giving can be uplifting! If Christmas is not your holiday, offer to cover a shift for a co-worker who would really appreciate the time off. Even if you do not have someone to spend time with over the holidays, offer to volunteer to visit a shut-in (in addition to making their holiday brighter, you'll help yourself in the process.) Volunteer your time and energy in some small way that is not necessarily monetary -- not only will this meaningful contribution make you feel good, the ripple effects will be far-reaching! When I recently tried to explain to my 3 year-old son that Christmas was baby Jesus' birthday celebration, he said, "gee mom, it's always someone else's birthday! Never mine!" Children can reflect societal influences quite well.

6) BE CHILD-LIKE AGAIN:

My son does have this one down! "Wow Mommy," he exclaims as we travel towards home, "look at the beautiful lights there and there and there!" Let your senses soak in the sights, sounds and smells of the season. Touch the soft bows and cuddly bears. Smell the scent of pine and apple cider. Taste the delicacies; savor them instead of scarfing them. Stop to reflect in front of the lights -- be they in the shape of a star or a tree or a Santa figure -- they are all beautiful and fun! While rushing around, take a moment to stop and enjoy in your own authentic and positive way!

However you spend the holidays, may you find something good this year -- even if it is the thought that "soon it will be over!"

Read another article on [Holiday Coping Tips](#) by Dr. John Grohol.