

Holiday **STRESS** Solutions

by **DEBBIE TOMASOVIC, LMFT**

Perhaps you have noticed the existence of both a romanticized version of the holiday season and then the humbling reality that the holiday season can be chock-full of unintended stressors. Let's identify some of the possible holiday stressors that can zap our patience and our energy. And then, let's brainstorm effective and simple holiday stress solutions.

Holiday stressors include everything from overspending on gifts, decorations, and meal preparation to children having meltdowns at the third family gathering of the day after snacking on sugary treats and having no time for that daily nap. Extra traffic, crowded stores, darker driving conditions, and being amongst other stress-filled shoppers takes its toll. Losing sight of our routine, including less regular exercise, eating those same sugary treats, and a lack of downtime leads to some decidedly fowl moods. Feeling the pressure to host the perfect family gathering, buy the perfect gifts, and not disappoint anyone produces much unwanted anxiety. Loneliness or grief that resurfaces during the holidays is a painful reminder that the holiday season is not always full of joyful togetherness for

all. Even more painful is the disconnect between the Norman Rockwell-like images on television of happy families gathered around the dinner table and the contentious gatherings of some families where tension, violence, or substance abuse abounds. For those who do not celebrate the holidays at this time of year, there is no escaping the abundant Christmas music and decorations put forth, beginning in October! Work schedules often shift, with less hours

and income available to those whose work slows down this time of year, while others can experience pressure to overwork in their retail or customer service positions.

Well, now that I have painted quite the bleak and stressful picture, let's consider some of the holiday stress solutions available to us to manage our stress and take better care of ourselves during the holiday season.

Alleviate financial pressures with a holiday budget set beforehand, deciding to only buy gifts for the children in your family, participating in a gift exchange with other adults, or setting a gift dollar amount limit. Shopping online to avoid the crowds on the road and in the stores can be relieving. Setting intentions to maintain some of your basic self care including regular exercise, protecting some alone time, and making decisions before you attend gatherings regarding your food and alcohol consumption are wise things you do have control over. Setting good boundaries including saying "no" to too many expectations of places to

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be in one day or gatherings to be responsible for protects our energy. Being willing to ask for help hosting, including turning the family meal into a potluck keeps your responsibilities at a realistic level. Monitoring your children's limits regarding how much travel they can handle, and routine or downtime they require helps reduce those meltdowns by emotionally overloaded children. Letting others know if you are on your own for the holidays, so they have the opportunity to invite you into their gathers is a great way of building community with others. There are dozens of volunteering opportunities available to us to participate in a meaningful way and show up for someone else during the holiday season. With all of our culture's focus on consumerism, setting your intention to focus on what brings you true meaning during the holidays can be powerful. Whether this involves attending a church service, giving to those in need, or connecting with loved ones, you can set your intention and let go of the rest of those unrealistic expectations. Recognizing we cannot

meet unrealistic expectations helps us let go of perfectionism and simply do our best or do what feels right for ourselves and our immediate family. This may mean forgoing one too many family gatherings in one weekend or taking turns visiting extended relatives each year. For those who do not participate in the holidays, making plans to spend quiet time in nature, curled up with a good book, or gathering with other like-minded folks can be relieving.

While there are many unintended stressors that come with the quickly approaching holiday season, there are just as many things we can do to manage our stress. Knowing our limits, setting our intentions, and managing our boundaries helps this season be one of joy and peace for all.

Debbie Tomasovic, LMFT is the co-owner of A Better Way Counseling, here in Vancouver. She encourages her clients to get creative with their holiday stress solutions, in order to maintain good self care during the holiday season. www.abwcs.com

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