

## Coping Creatively with Holiday Stress

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Entering the holiday season will often challenge our usual romanticized images and expectations. The laughter of the “Ho, Ho, Ho” may give way to the pressure of the “Go, Go, Go.” Fantasies of a “silent night” turn into the noisy bustle of crowded department stores. For some, the jingling of Christmas bells yields to the jangling of nerves. We may find ourselves moving from holiday dreams to horrible nightmares, from anticipation to aggravation, from sugar plums to sour grapes, from happiness to a state of stress.

Let’s consider ways in which we may be able to reduce the stress and depression that can interfere with our enjoyment of the holidays. It is impossible to eliminate the many stresses of this great season, but there are several principles that can help us deal with stress more effectively and experience a more eXcellent holiday season.

1. **eXpress** your concerns, ideas, and tensions. As the pressures of time and responsibilities mount up during the holidays, it is important to find constructive, positive ways to express our anxieties and thoughts to others. Tensions will find expression somehow. If our concerns are not verbalized or acted upon effectively, they may find expression through irritability, depression, bodily aches and pains, or striking out at others. It is crucial to keep in touch with significant others who are understanding, and share with them your emotions and worries. *It is better to have expression rather than repression that leads to depression.*
2. **eXamine** your expectations and priorities. Do a reality check on what you expect of yourself and of others during the holiday season. Unrealistic expectations can only result in frustration and disappointment. It is also beneficial to reflect on our priorities since we cannot spend as much time and energy as we may wish with people we care about, or accomplish all the activities we see as valuable. For example, it may be better to spend less time pursuing the “ideal gift” for someone we love, and more time with the loved one. *How we think about events and activities of the holidays will determine our emotional state more than the actual events themselves.*
3. **eXercise**. During the hustle and bustle of the season, we often discover that there is little time available for keeping up with needed physical exercise. Running around to numerous shops at the mall does not qualify as a stress-reducing workout, nor does cleaning the house or organizing the garage. We all need to find a physical activity that allows us to “get the juices flowing” and relieve tension. Taking a brisk walk, jogging, playing sports, or working out in a gym brings enjoyable stress reduction. *Devoting some time each day to exercise results in greater productivity and emotional ease during the rest of the day.*

4. **eXtend** yourself. It is tempting to become preoccupied with My schedule, My shopping needs, and My time demands. Such self-absorption and egocentricity increases one's level of worry and sense of pressure. A well documented stress-buster is to reach out to others in affirming, affectionate, helpful ways. Psychologists have found that people who are leading fulfilling lives are invariably involved in concerns "outside their own skin." In extending ourselves to others we find a deeper, more fulfilling joy within ourselves. It is then that we experience the joy of giving, and come to a better understanding of the idea that *it is more blessed to give than to receive*.
5. **eXclude** excesses. The holiday season can become a time of too much activity, too much eating, and too much alcohol. Such excesses may lead to feelings of being frenzied, fat and fuzzy-headed. Obviously, this pattern of behavior is not only nonproductive, but counterproductive. We are likely to find ourselves being impatient, irritable and irrational with those we care about the most. We need to carve out some quiet time for reflection on the reason for the season, and develop a deeper appreciation for the positive aspects of this special time of the year. *Genuine joy in our relationships and activities will be greatly enhanced and better remembered through moderation.*
6. **eXplore** new options. Most families develop important traditions relating to their approach to and celebration of the holidays, and this is good. However, there may be great value in considering some new ways to cope with the challenges and festivities of the season. Conversations among your family and friends may reveal some "annual frustrations" with the old ways, and generate some refreshing ideas about new possibilities. Continue and enrich activities which have been found to be meaningful, and then explore alternatives to those that have served their purpose. *The intrigue and uncertainty of a new adventure can add excitement to the holidays.*
7. **eXhale** as much as you inhale. During the holiday season there will be numerous occasions for us to catch our breath, hold our breath, wait with bated breath, or experience a breath-taking moment. We may do a lot of inhaling that is not followed by sufficient exhaling (as would occur in effective relaxation). As we go from one breath-taking moment to another, shallow breathing prevails and tension develops. As hard as it may seem, we need to have some regular moments of complete relaxation in which we fully exhale. While waiting for someone or making a transition from one activity to another, *use these "idle" moments productively to breathe out and relax.*

Hopefully, applying these seven guidelines will help us have a holiday season that is safe, sane and satisfying. Like most any aspect of living, a preventive approach is always more fun, less time-consuming and cheaper than the restorative approach. Have an eXhilarating holiday season and an eXciting New Year!