How to have a stress free holiday season



The holiday season may be the most wonderful time of the year ─ but it can also be the most stressful. Many of us spend every spare minute shopping, decorating, cooking, baking, wrapping, socializing and worrying whether or not everything will get done! We're also worrying about starting the New Year in the red as the cost of gifts, entertaining, travel, and food can decimate our budgets.

Adding to our stress can be family and friends. For weeks leading up the holidays, we're bombarded with commercials and television programs depicting perfect people enjoying happy times together. The reality is often cranky children, argumentative siblings, critical parents, difficult in-laws, and demanding bosses!

Are there ways to reduce the stress and actually enjoy the season? Yes, there are! Try the following:

- **Stop striving for perfection.** You'll only be disappointed and upset when people and events don't live up to what could be your unrealistic expectations. Do what you can, expect the unexpected, and don't beat yourself up when things don't go as planned.
- **Remember that you can only control your own behaviour.** Don't expect family, friends or coworkers to be perfect just because it's the holidays. In fact, conflicts and dysfunction are actually heightened at this time of the year. Accept that people will not necessarily act the way you want them to and be understanding when those around you get upset when something goes wrong. They're probably feeling the effects of holiday stress as well.
- **Set a budget and stick to it.** It's easy to get carried away and spend more than you can afford. Create your budget early, write it down, and resist the urge to spend more. If you're feeling the squeeze, consider easy and affordable homemade gifts: a batch of cookies, container of spiced nuts, or framed photo of significance.
- **Learn to say no**. Saying yes to everything can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Try to set boundaries. Your friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity
- **Make time for fun.** Whether it's coffee with friends, playing sports or watching holiday movies at home with the kids, make time for your own fun – even if that means not finishing everything on your to-do list.

Coping with holiday stress

Despite all our efforts, things will still get stressful. When they do, try these tips:

- **Focus on what's important.** What, for you, is the season about? Spending time with extended family? Helping the less fortunate? Connecting with your faith? Focus your energies on the things that are most meaningful to you.
- **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Get plenty of sleep and physical activity and try to limit sweet treats and fatty foods. Overindulging only adds to your stress and guilt.
- **Don't self-medicate**. Don't "treat" your tiredness, lack of energy, or anxiety with alcohol, caffeine, nicotine or other substances. These will only worsen your stress in the long run.
- **Practice gratitude.** No matter how frantic your day is or how stressed you may feel, there is always something for which you can be grateful. Many people find it helpful to write down a certain number of things they are thankful for every day.
- **Breathe. When you start feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, take three deep breaths, inhaling** until your whole chest and stomach expand and then exhaling slowly and completely.

Most importantly, don't shoulder all the responsibility. Delegate tasks and accept help when it's offered. If, despite your best efforts, the holiday season has you feeling anxious, upset or sad, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program for emotional support, financial advice or other helpful resources.