

Making Right Choices Can Keep Holiday Stress Low

"It's the most wonderful time of the year," or so it is said. Ready or not, the holiday season is in full swing and we're counting the days until Christmas (22 to be exact) or Hanukkah (13). Whether we consider ourselves to be religious, spiritual, or none of the above, the holidays affect us all. With endless



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traffic jams, huge crowds, and tons of requests for year-end giving to one good cause or another, we're surrounded with evidence of the season everywhere.

For some, the holidays are welcomed as a time of comfort, fellowship and sharing—for personal reflection, reconnection and celebration. For others, however, it's a sad reminder of the loss of a loved one, a recent divorce, or the fact that there just isn't enough money.

Commercialization of the season, advertising blitzes and exhortations to buy now pay later, push many of us to spend well beyond what we can afford. It's reported that Americans spend more than \$200 billion dollars on holiday gifts—and this doesn't include the cost of travel, gasoline, postage, parties and more. Instead of being "the season to be jolly" it's often the season to feel guilty when you're unable to afford gifts for your family and friends.

Although it's easy to feel overwhelmed, the urban legend

claiming that suicide rates increase between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day is false. According to most studies, fewer suicides occur on major holidays because, it is hypothesized, it is easier to be distracted from troubling thoughts. That said, I see a lot of depressed individuals and couples this time of year.

It's often difficult for many people to get into the holiday spirit. The stereotypical Norman Rockwell image of a family happily gathered together for a sumptuous feast doesn't represent those without family or loved ones. Loneliness is a huge problem, especially when you feel like you're the only one who is alone.

Then there are the couples who have partners and families, but are cut off from one another. Because of their hectic schedules, couples tell me they spend the least amount of personal time together during the weeks between Halloween and New Year's Eve. They have less intimate touching, communication and sex in general. When I suggest they do some simple things to connect, I often hear, "The family is visiting so we had no time to be alone" or "we didn't have a moment to spare." Some families are sadly divided for one silly reason or another—too stubborn to reconcile their differences.

During the holidays we eat and drink more, sleep less, exercise less (unless you consider pushing yourself through a crowded mall to be your daily work out), and feel generally exhausted with mounting social obligations and ever-growing to-do lists. It's easy to feel like a failure as a parent and as a partner. Consider this example.

Standing on the edge of the shopping

cart making loud fire-engine noises, Joshua, Monique's 6-year-old, was becoming more and more impatient. The Snicker's bar she had given him as an obvious bribe for his silence, had long been devoured. Agatha, Joshua's 3-month-old baby sister, remained blissfully asleep in her carrier through the entire racket, wrapped in her cozy pink blanket that matched the color of her pacifier. "Only one more item and she'd be done with her Thanksgiving shopping," thought Monique—"with only 12 hours to spare!" She pushed the cart frantically through the crowded grocery store.

Just then, Joshua accidentally tipped the cart, waking the baby who began to howl. All eyes were on Monique. She felt her face go bright red. Soon both children were screaming. After waiting in what felt like one of the longest checkout lines of her life, Monique arrived at her car only to find that her right front tire had gone flat. "What else could go wrong today?" she asked herself. Fortunately Joshua and Agatha had calmed down and were fast asleep by the time AAA arrived.

Although she and Jon had been married for nearly seven years, this was the first time she'd have his entire family over to their house for Thanksgiving. Jon's mother was a fabulous cook and very particular. Monique spent weeks cleaning the house, polishing the silver and making sure everything was perfect. She was stressed beyond words. To top it off, she knew that Jon would be interested in making love that night because they'd have no privacy once his parents arrived

and she didn't want to disappoint him. His sexual appetite had always been higher than hers.

Later that evening, after they had supper, Monique decided to try something new. She approached Jon and told him about her nightmare of a day. He listened sympathetically. Instead of making love she asked if he'd be open to joining her in the tub for a hot soak followed by one of his terrific back rubs. Jon was happy to help her relax. Once in bed, she suggested they get up a little early for a "quickie" before he helped her with the final meal preparations. "Sounds like a deal," he said. It turned out to be a wonderful Thanksgiving, turkey and all.

It's not the holidays that stress us—it's our choices. We can take a passive approach and allow ourselves to be swept up in a whirlwind of obligations and demands, or we can look for opportunities to be more connected. Instead of being overwhelmed and anxious with unattainable expectations of perfection, let's remember the significance of this time of festivals. Instead of giving materially, let's give of ourselves. And let's share the greatest gift of all—the gift of love. After all, isn't that what makes this "the most wonderful time of the year?"

Staying Calm Amid The Chaos

■ Consider alternatives to the commercialism of the holidays—paint a room for someone, make a dinner, give a photo or a coupon for a massage (it's much better than a tie or an inedible fruit cake—and there will be no gift

returns).

■ Get some exercise and rest in a healthy balance. Driving yourself to the end of your physical and emotional rope won't make your holiday merrier—you'll just feel like a martyr (and no one likes a martyr).

■ Make time for yourselves. If you both indulge in a little pampering, you'll feel more like sharing love—or anything else. Even though it may not sound macho—your man may appreciate a pedicure and foot massage. It might be fun to even get one together. If you don't take something for yourselves, you'll have less to give to others.

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