

MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK



Jagan Institute of Management Studies

MANAGEMENT
MAGAZINE

VOLUME 6, ISSUE 6

Managing The Seemingly Inevitable Holiday Season Stress Holiday Stress Relief is On The Way!

Welcome to the holiday season -- that whirlwind of gift-giving holidays, marketing blitzes, holiday parties and activities galore that begins right after Halloween, builds to Thanksgiving, and continues gaining momentum through the end of the year.

While this season is meant to bring feelings of love and cheer, it's also the harbinger of holiday stress for many. In fact, according to a poll conducted on this site, more than 80% of us find the holiday season to be 'somewhat' or 'very' stressful -- that ranks navigating the holidays right up there with asking for a raise! What is it that has us all so hot and bothered?

What Causes Holiday Stress?

Doing Too Much
All things in moderation, as the saying goes. The problem with the holiday season is that we often

experience too much of a good thing. While stress itself is necessary for our survival and zest for life (researchers call this positive type of stress "eustress"), too much stress has a negative impact on our health, both mental and physical. Too many activities, even if they are fun activities, can culminate in too much holiday stress and leave us feeling frazzled, rather than fulfilled.

Eating, Drinking and Spending Too Much
An overabundance of parties and gift-giving occasions lead many people to eat, drink, and be merry -- often to excess. The temptation to overindulge in spending, rich desserts or alcohol can cause many people the lasting stress of dealing with consequences (debt, weight gain, memories of embarrassing behavior) that can linger long after the season is over.

Too Much Togetherness
The holidays are a time when extended families tend to gather. While this can be a wonderful

thing, even the most close-knit families can overdose on togetherness, making it hard for family members to maintain a healthy balance between bonding and alone time. Many families also have 'roles' that each member falls into that have more to do with who individuals used to be rather than who they are today, which can sometimes bring more dread than love to these gatherings.

Not Enough Togetherness
For those who don't have these family issues, loneliness can be just as much of a problem. As the world seems to be gathering with family, those who rely more on friends for support can feel deserted and alone.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)
An often unrecognized problem that comes with the holiday season is actually a by-product of the seasons changing from fall to winter. As daylight diminishes and the weather causes many

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of us to spend more time indoors, many people are affected to some degree by a type of depression known as seasonal affective disorder. It's a subtle, but very real condition that can cast a pall over the whole season and be a source of stress and unhappiness during a time that people expect to feel just the opposite.

Minimizing The Holiday Stress
The great thing about holiday stress is that it's predictable. Unlike many other types of negative stress we encounter in life, we know when holiday stress will begin and end, and we can make plans to reduce the amount of stress we experience and the negative impact it has on us.

Here are some tips you can try to help reduce holiday stress before it begins so that it remains at a positive level, rather than an overwhelming one:

Set Your Priorities
Before you get overwhelmed by too many activities, it's important to decide what traditions offer the most positive impact and eliminate superfluous activities. For example, if you usually become overwhelmed by a flurry of baking, caroling, shopping, sending cards, visiting relatives and other activities that leave you exhausted by January, you may want to examine your priorities, pick a few favorite activities and really enjoy them, while skipping the rest

Cut Corners If you can't fathom the idea of skipping out on sending cards, baking, seeing people, and doing all of the stuff that

usually runs you ragged, you may do better including all of these activities in your schedule, but on a smaller scale.

Send cards, for example, but only to those with whom you maintain regular communication. Or, don't include a personal note or letter in each one. Find a way to simplify. The same goes for the baking -- will anyone be enraged if you buy baked goods from the bakery instead? If you find ways to cut corners or tone down the activities that are important to you and your family, you may enjoy them much more.

Change Your Expectations For Togetherness With family and friends, it's important to be aware of your limitations. Think back to previous years and try to pinpoint how much togetherness you and your family can take before feeling negative stress. Can you limit the number of parties you attend or throw, or the time you spend at each? Can you limit your time with family to a smaller timeframe that will still feel special and joyous, without draining you?

Also, when dealing with difficult relatives, it's okay to set limits on what you are and are not willing to do, including forgoing your visits or limiting them to every other year.

For those who experience loneliness during the holidays, consider inviting a group of friends to your home. If virtually everyone you know is with family during the holidays, you might consider volunteering to help those less fortunate than yourself. Many people report these experiences to be extremely fulfilling, and your focus will be on what you have rather than what you lack.

Set A Schedule Putting your plans on paper can show you, in black and white, how realistic they are.

If you find a time management planner and fill in the hours with your scheduled activities, being realistic and including driving time and down time, you will be able to see if you're trying to pack in too much. Start with your highest priorities, so you will be able to eliminate the less important activities. Be sure to schedule in some time to take a walk in nature each day if at all possible, as exercise and exposure to daylight can drastically reduce or even eliminate the symptoms of SAD. (If climate or other factors prohibit this, try to find some time to sit by a window and look out; several minutes of exposure to natural light, even if through a window pane, can help.)

Breathe! This sounds like a no-brainer, but sometimes we forget to take deep breaths and really give our bodies the oxygen we need. It's great if you can take ten minutes by yourself to do a breathing meditation, but merely stopping to take a few deep, cleansing breaths can reduce your level of negative stress in a matter of minutes, too. If you visualize that you are breathing in serenity and breathing out stress, you will find the positive effects of this exercise to be even more pronounced.

With a little planning and a few minor but significant changes, this holiday season can bring the love and joy it was meant to bring, and leave you feeling fulfilled rather than drained.

By Elizabeth Scott, M.S.

