

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
FROM YOUR EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING YOUR
HOLIDAY STRESS!!!

One humorous, but none-the-less true definition of *insanity* is “Doing the same thing over and over, but (unrealistically) expecting that there will be more satisfying results the next time we do it.” Well... the holiday season is once again upon us, and despite the joy and excitement that they bring, many of us are beginning to re-experience that familiar, but uncomfortable feeling that we have a thousand things to do, but only enough time and money for five hundred of them.

As December rolls around each year, many of us find that we experience increasing levels of stress and pressure as the demands and deadlines for shopping, sending cards, decorating, cooking, planning gatherings, etc. draw ever nearer and we anticipate the arrival of relatives and friends. This seemingly “paradoxical” response to what is supposed to be “a season of celebration” has several names (and faces) including “Holiday Stress”, “The Holiday Blues” and “Seasonal Affective Disorder”, and unfortunately is more common than most of us realize. What follows are some explanations of what causes this annual bout of seasonal discomfort and some suggestions on how to avoid becoming an annual casualty of this condition.

Cause #1: Social & personal expectations that you “SHOULD BE MERRY”!

Just about everyone feels compelled to look and feel happy during the holidays. Often people feel just the opposite and ask themselves, “What’s wrong with me?”. The fact is that for many of us the holidays can be the most stressful or even saddest time of year.

Possible Solutions:

Give yourself permission to have “honesty” in your holiday emotions. Talk to a close friend, a pastor or mentor the Employee Assistance Program, or other family members. “Letting it out” and understanding the roots of your feelings will help you to “normalize” this annual experience and the feelings that go with it.

Cause #2: Too many responsibilities!

Crazy kids, too many presents, guests, cooking, obligatory gifts, decorations, cleaning, financial pressures, (etc, etc, etc) can lead to OVERLOAD!!! This is a normal and not uncommon experience for many of us at this time of year.

Possible Solutions:

First, try making a list of everything you will attempt to get done in the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years. If just looking at the list makes you tired, it’s time to cut back on the volume of things you are planning. Don’t over-commit! Don’t agree to do something “just to be nice”; particularly if it will make you feel “not nice at all”! If something doesn’t sound like it will enhance your holiday or just can’t be gotten to, “Drop it!”. No one else will ever know and you’ll enjoy the holiday that much more.

Cause #3: Trying to change or control other people!

Yes it's true. . . during the holidays your kids may be crazy with unrealistic expectations and greed, Dad may be grouchy about the family's cash flow, Mom may feel overloaded and "dumped-on", and the extended family may argue over who will host family celebrations. The holidays make us all act differently, and not necessarily for the better. Trying to point out and fix these undesirable changes in others often leads to World War 3 and a generally unpleasant holiday season.

Possible Solutions:

Within reason, grant yourself and others around you permission to react to the holidays any way you choose. Try not to "sweat the small stuff", because it's all small stuff. Realize that "the only sane response to a crazy situation is to act crazy yourself". You have permission to be *NUTS!* Also remember the *Serenity Prayer* and what it says about knowing the difference between what you do and don't control. Do the best you can to change things, but often *serenity* is the best you'll get!

Cause #4: Unpleasant Memories ("The Holiday Blues")

Many people have unpleasant recollections associated with the holidays, or find that the holidays cause them to "grieve" recent, or even distant losses in their lives. This is a common experience and should not be taken as an indication that something is fundamentally wrong with them.

Possible Solutions:

While we can't (and shouldn't) forget the past, we can focus on memories without pain. Ease the healing process associated with grieving by sharing stories, family history, and pictures of those we have lost with the younger members of the family. Remember that positive memories have an even greater potential to bring joy than they do pain. If there have been unpleasant events in your past holidays, strive to establish new, enjoyable holiday experiences with family and friends to displace them.

Cause #5: Spontaneous Physical & Emotional Distress!

Even when negative memories don't surface consciously, sometimes we are unknowingly exposed to "trigger" situations that unconsciously produce physical and/or emotional symptoms. These memories, and/or the vulnerability caused by "doing too much" may result in changes in sleep, mood, appetite, productivity, energy, as well as muscle tension, GI discomfort, or other physical and/or emotional symptoms.

Possible Solutions:

Should you find yourself becoming symptomatic, remove yourself from your immediate surroundings and take some time to regroup and calm down. Try to understand what was triggering you. Often there is an unpleasant memory or association that was made in your mind by a trigger. Try also to "reframe" trigger situations in a more objective, less emotional terms. If all else fails remember that the EAP is available to assist you in sorting this out.

Cause #6: Insisting that everything must go perfectly and blaming yourself (or others) when it doesn't!

During the holidays, there is a huge increase in our expectations for "perfect" outcomes and a parallel increase in the number of opportunities for things to go wrong. This combination virtually guarantees "some" disappointments for a majority of us, and for those of us who are "perfectionistic" is a recipe for disaster.

Possible Solutions:

Do an “expectation inventory” and “reality check”. Get rid of expectations that are unrealistically high or lack flexibility. Remember that during the holidays “Murphy’s Law” is in overdrive, “If Something Can Go Wrong, It Will Go Wrong!” By expecting and planning for problems, you will be far better able to cope. And again... “Don’t sweat the small stuff!”

Cause #7: Procrastination!

Some people “love” the excitement of leaving many of their holiday tasks for the last minute. Others seem to go into denial that the calendar is actually moving, or that they have accomplished very few of the dozens of things most of us need to accomplish at this time of year. Either one of these “distortions” could “blind-side us”; leaving us “buried” in an avalanche of last minute “to dos” and maxing-out our stress levels.

Possible Solutions:

Try approaching the holiday pressures of last minute decorations, shopping, cooking, cleaning, cards, etc, in the same way a great general anticipates a major battle... Become a planner!!! List everything that has to get done and assign it a date or priority in that list. Accomplish a few tasks each day, every day, over an extended period. Demand help! Delegate tasks to other members of your family. Accept that some things may not get done and that some things may not get done “your way”. And again, remember that no one will notice what didn’t get done unless you feel compelled to “make it public”.

Cause #8: Opening up unresolved family conflicts!

Sometimes bringing relatives together who rarely see each other can have an unpleasant consequence... “Using the holidays to take up old, unresolved family business!” Parents who treat their adult children as kids, siblings who resume unresolved disputes they last debated decades ago and relatives who keep a “running tally” on what gifts were given, their cost and whether someone was “cheated” are invariably a possibility in some “high energy” families.

Possible Solutions:

If you think any of these might occur, have an “action plan” set up in advance. Have a strategy to resist getting drawn into “old business”. Stay positive, or better yet, use the holidays as a time of forgiveness and renewal. Make a concerted effort to “make peace” with family and friends with whom you have difficulties. Strive to keep everyone active (and distracted). Plan “positive” activities that minimize free time and redirect attention toward the mutually enjoyable sharing such as a concert, sporting event, play, movie or church service. If you have house guests, plan for shorter stays (a 2-4 day maximum) or reserve motel rooms to ensure privacy and “down time”.

Cause #9: Going Broke for the Sake of Happiness!

Many of us feel pressure during the holidays to spend beyond our means and without regard for our actual income. We also may lose track of expenses by counting “the number” of gifts we give or mentally “compartmentalizing” each purchase rather than watching the totals we are cumulatively spending. Building large credit card balances can cause holiday stress that will last for months (or years), and may derail other family financial goals such as saving for vacations, college and retirement. “Keeping up with the Jones” and making the kids happy is tough (and expensive)!

Possible Solutions:

Make sure that your holiday spending is determined by your budget and not by your guilt or need to impress others. Approach the Holidays the way you would any “big ticket purchase”... with a budget! Identify how much you can afford to spend for the entire holiday and then divide it into

categories such as; travel, entertaining, food, gifts, etc. Make a list of each person you plan to give to and assign set a dollar amount against that name based on your budget. Stick to it! If you must use credit cards spend no more than you can reasonable pay off in three months.

HERE'S TWO MORE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO DEAL WITH HOLIDAY STRESS!!!

FIRST: Use DEA's Free LifeCare Program To Find Even More Suggestions and Resources...

- Download a free guide on managing holiday stress
- Participate in an on-demand e-seminar on beating the holiday blues
- Get tips to help you manage time and stress
- Find out how you can stick to a realistic budget with free guides, helpful tips, and interactive calculators
- Learn how to cope with remembering lost loved ones
- Log on for helpful tips on adult care & aging.
- Call for personalized referrals to adult care resources, senior centers, meal delivery services, and more.
- Request your free Adult Care Kit -- it's loaded with helpful products and practical care-giving info. For those of us who have elder care responsibilities.
- Use the Backup Care Connection to help you locate and pay for temporary care for children and older loved ones when your regular care arrangements breakdown.

Log on to www.lifecare.com and enter Screen Name: **usdoj** and Password: **dea** (case sensitive). For assistance logging on, contact the Help Desk at 1-888-604-9565. Or call **800-873-4636** (or 800-873-1322 for TTY/TDD service) to discuss your needs with a LifeCare specialist 24 hours a day.

SECOND: You can call DEA's Employee Assistance Program for Free, Confidential Counseling or Consultation...

The EAP is prepared to assist with almost any type of problem (or question) that you or a member of your family might have. We can help you clarify sources of personal distress, find solutions that reduce or resolve problems or identify specialized sources of assistance when problems are beyond the scope of our in-house expertise. Free, confidential EAP counseling is available to DEA employees and families almost everywhere in the U.S., Alaska, Hawaii & Caribbean.

Have more questions? Visit The EAP's website on **WebSter** simply clicking on the EAP logo or on the Internet at www.dea.gov, Programs and Operations, Employee Assistance Program. We're also available 24 hours-a-day call by calling 1-800-275-7460.

THE DEA EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
(800) 275-7460