

Handling Holiday Stress

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My life seems stressful enough without a few holidays. Don't get me wrong, I love the festive Christmas spirit and especially the reason for our celebration. I just get dizzy thinking about decorating our home, inside and out (modeling after Chevy Chase's Christmas Vacation house, of course), finding and buying gifts for a zillion people, food preparation, traveling, and on and on and on, with a deadline no less! We'll pack it all in again this year. And, spend quality time with one hundred and fifty or so of our closest relatives, on our (get this) VACATION. Didn't that used to mean rest and relaxation?

One of the most stress producing things we do during the holidays is to try to accomplish too many things and perfectly of course. It is time we change our holiday strategy to one that actually honors God and produces the joy and fulfillment we seek each year. Here are some tips on how to keep your POISE during the stressful holiday season.

Prioritize people over perfection, and presents. Put first things first. Decide in advance what is really important to you. What is **your reason for the season**? A perfect dinner? Family time? Presents? Not setting priorities and reasonable goals in advance can lead to heartache and disappointment when you expected joy and fulfillment. On the other side of our table growing up I recall an empty chair. The seat vacated by my mother busily preparing this or that. In her well-meaning way she chased the dream of making the holidays perfect for all of us. Stressed, tired and irritable, her days and weeks of work were never quite good enough and could easily be crushed by a careless word of criticism.

Criticism over an imperfect dinner isn't the only thing that can kill your holiday joy. We all carry unrealistic childhood expectations in us that we subtly have for each year. We all have dreams of the perfect holiday, and most of us just about kill ourselves and our family year after year trying to achieve it.

If you want a change this year try this experiment. Expect nothing. You will find serendipity at each turn. More importantly, you will also find the joy in the birth of Jesus, the only perfect event during this holiday season.

Organize yourself if you're going to try to run the rat race again this year. At least do it with wisdom. Planning ahead and delegating responsibilities like shopping, food preparation, tree and house decorating can lower your stress level and your blood pressure. Try having a holiday folder with lists of "To Dos", a calendar with holiday plans and lists for cards, thank you notes and gift buying. Also, be a good steward of your time by filling only half of your time with activity. Save the rest for time attention and affection with family and friends. Organize your finances as well. The financial anxiety you incur both before and long after the holidays is never worth the brief thrills at gift giving time.

Immunize yourself from stress by starting or continuing healthy habits throughout the holidays. Simple things like getting plenty of rest, exercise and vitamins can boost your defenses against illness and anxiety. You can also keep good eating habits by designating a meal or two per day when you keep a healthy, well-balanced diet. Too much junk food and sugar in your body can set you on an emotional roller-coaster ride that you may want to avoid.

Socializing is another easy way to immunize for stress. This should include both fun and quality time with a spouse, your friends, by yourself and with God. Even a deposit of 15 minutes per day can maintain the emotional bank account needed for surviving stress well. So, have fun! "Love each other deeply from the heart" (I Pet. 1:22). Build, repair and establish the reservoir of relationships that will last long after the holidays.

Empathize. When the stress does hit, and, it inevitably will, take time to express yourself to someone else and help someone else feel heard. Holidays bring up lots of emotional baggage. Use the blessing of your relationships to vent before your stress erupts onto others through rage, or implodes all over you through depression. As we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, let His peace rule in your heart (Col. 3:15) as you speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), cast your cares on Him (I Pet. 5:7), bear each others burdens (Gal. 6:2), and share in His comfort (2 Cor. 1:4).

The most valuable gifts you can give this year are time, attention and affection to your family, your friends, yourself and your Lord. Take the time to build on what will last, on what is important by keeping your "POISE". When the turkey is gone, the boxes are empty, the toys are broken and discarded, all that will remain are the memories you made and the impact you had on someone else's life. What statement will you leave behind?

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