

How to reduce holiday stress



The holidays can be an enormously stressful time of year. Gift-giving, financial strain with extra expenses, social expectations with family and professional events...the barrage of seasonal pressures can push even the calmest and coolest among us to their limits.

8 out of 10 anticipate stress during the holiday season¹

~American Psychological Association

Now's the time to take a step back, take a deep breath and build a strategy to handle some of the main stressors of the holiday season.

Gift Giving Challenges

Remember, it really is the thought, not the dollar amount that counts. So, pause and think about the people on the receiving end, their interests and lifestyles, get inspired before you go on the hunt for that perfect present. A few ideas that won't break the bank:

Choose a charity. That person who seems to have it all can be notoriously difficult to shop for. So why shop at all? Forego holiday crowds (and mall-madness!) by donating your time or money, in their name, to an organization or cause near and dear to them. Such thoughtful gifts truly embody the spirit of the season.

Set expectations and limits. Holiday wish lists made with the intention of easing gift-finding pressure can create a lot of anxiety. Presents can quickly turn pricey, and give rise to unrealistic expectations. So, set your financial boundaries and stick to them. Ask friends and family for multiple gift options and let it be known you're on a budget for that special something, they – and your pocketbook! – will appreciate.

Do things instead of buying things. Time is a valuable gift, especially during the holidays. Offer to help with seasonal tasks, like gift-wrapping that will free up some of that most precious commodity. Take the kids out while parents hit holiday festivities or go shopping. Even better, spend some quality time together building a snowman, playing a board game, co-crafting or taking a family trip. Savouring the season and making memories are what make the holidays so very special.

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Budgeting Holiday Spending

The holidays can be expensive. Dinners, gift exchanges, and travelling to and from parties, gatherings and shopping centres quickly eat up cash. Budgeting is an easy way to plan for the holiday season, and prepares you for next year's spending. The more prepared you are, the less likely you are to rack up stress-inducing debt.

Some tried and true tactics:

Create an overarching, realistic budget. An annual budget with a section dedicated to the holidays will push you to save in small increments over time limiting end-of-the-year fiscal worries. Haven't done a budget this year? It's okay! Create a holiday-specific budget now, by outlining expenses and what you can spend during this time. Take into account travel, dining out, and other seasonal staples that extend beyond gift giving.

Lay down specific, holiday spending limits. After your main budget, take a more micro view of your holiday money and allocate actual amounts and firm limits to each section and sub-section. Meticulously track your spending to ensure you aren't paying for the holidays into next year. Breaking down precisely where you want each dollar to go, from gifts to dinners and everything in between, then sticking to those caps will keep your spending (and peace of mind!) on track. It can also make choosing gifts easier: knowing your exact price points narrows the all-too-often overwhelming number of choices available to you from every storefront, internet pop-up and billboard.

Make shopping lists. Before you shop, set a game plan! Research sales, map out where you'll be shopping and plot your route for maximum efficiency and minimum stress. Take a list of what you want to buy at each stop and don't go beyond your list or your budget.

Minimising Social Stressors and Anxiety

Beyond the tsunami of social media posts, commercials, cards, parties and invitations, the holidays also present a plethora of social events, obligations and stressors that can be upsetting. Again, foresight and planning can go a long way in taking care of your emotional well-being.

Holiday work events

Cookie exchanges, secret Santa's, office brunches and full-on seasonal parties...it seems almost inevitable that you'll end up participating in a holiday work event at some point before the season is over.

51% of offices schedule holiday events during business hours² and those that don't frequently host off-hours events.

Curb your stress by:

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Bringing a date (or good friend!) Most holiday work gatherings are planned well in advance and welcome "plus ones". This provides ample time and opportunity to schedule time with your significant other or to arrange time with a companion that'll help you enjoy the event and put you at ease.

Identifying specific stressors and making a plan. Prior to the event, ask yourself what exactly is causing your anxiety? Uncomfortable in social settings? Won't know anyone or what to say to those you do? Figuring out exactly what the most worrisome things for you are helps break down what may seem like an overwhelming challenge into smaller, more manageable pieces. Plan when you'll go, how long you'll stay, and who you'll make an effort to talk to. Wear something you feel good in, and that's comfortable to alleviate some of the possible uneasiness. Remember, most holiday work events aren't too long and have a clearly arranged beginning and end time. You can do it!

Limiting your drinking. You may think it'll "take the edge off" or "loosen you up" for conversations or introductions, but using alcohol as a social crutch can backfire and actually make you feel less in control of a situation or more uncomfortable with yourself and others. Be aware, although it may be a social gathering, a work event is still an extension of your professional environment. So, don't drink at all, or decide on an exact limit to keep things predictable, safe and fun.

Family Holiday Events

Families are complicated entities, and though the holidays can be some of the most precious times for close and distant relatives, they're also potentially volatile, awkward and even triggering. Perhaps you're introducing a new relationship or – even more anxiety-inducing – a relationship you know won't be well-received. Maybe you fully expect old wounds to be re-opened or a storm of intrusive questions. What can you do?

Draw on past experience to mentally prepare. Unlike the office, you're likely very familiar with the dynamics, individual quirks and personalities of those who will be attending your family event. This is an advantage in preparing yourself for it. If you know ahead of time that a family member has an affinity for profanity you find offensive, or that someone's passive-aggressiveness is especially prevalent during family gatherings, visualize these behaviours and how you will deal with them, calmly. It could be as simple as deep breathing while engaging with that member of your family, or excusing yourself when you start to feel tense.

Be open to good memory making. In most cases, families plan holiday gatherings with good intentions, and the genuine hope of connecting with loved ones. So, even if your family parties have a history of being stressful, make a concentrated effort to approach each one optimistically, yet realistically, and as a new, fresh opportunity to bond in any way you can. Be open, and consciously seek out special moments or shared laughter. Often the small, unexpected times become the happiest memories.

Don't take it personally. Miniscule disagreements tend to get blown out of proportion and become personal when family members are involved. Remembering this and taking a step back when things get heated or uncomfortable can help a great deal.

Avoiding Awkward Conversations

With so much seasonal anxiety stemming from interactions between family, friends and co-workers, these three simple approaches are a good start to getting through those less-than-ideal conversations with some real holiday cheer.

Know what's off-limits. Be conscious of your own – and others' – personal boundaries and potential triggers. Empowering yourself ahead of time by deciding what topics you won't discuss, and how you'll tactfully change the subject if need be is an easy and effective way to consciously steer the conversation.

Decide what you do like talking about. Conversation can be a wonderful way to connect, so take advantage of and relish it fully this season! Think ahead about topics, hobbies or interests you or those attending the gathering may find engaging and lean into those areas to get a conversation started – or re-direct one you aren't happy with.

Identify an exit strategy. Sometimes, respectfully removing yourself from a conversation is the best thing for you - and everyone - involved. So, locate the washroom, or a friendly face you can excuse yourself to visit before you start socializing. Or craft a short, simple script prior to the event to gracefully cut short any unpleasant chit-chat.

So much holiday stress can be reduced with simple patience and planning! Here's hoping these strategies help, and cheers to your happiest holiday season ever!

Sources:

1. Chi, Tiffany. "Crowds, Chaos, and Cousins: 12 Reasons You're Anxious this Holiday Season (and How to Cope)." Joyable, <http://joyable.com/blog/holiday-social-anxiety/>.
2. Heathfield, Susan M. "Stress Less For The Holidays." The Balance, TheBalance.com, 3 Dec. 2015, <http://www.thebalance.com/stress-less-for-the-holidays-1916836>.

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