

## Two Simple Tips to Manage Holiday Stress

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

While it is generally acknowledged that "the holidays" are stressful, most people seem to just accept that it will be stressful and continue their holiday tradition of being stressed out during the "silly season".

A few people will have the notion that they don't have to keep subjecting themselves to the same level of stress and emotional distress year after year, and will start telling themselves "this year it will be different". Of those, only a handful will actually take any action to reduce their stress by changing their old thinking, feelings, and behavior. (Sounds like addiction recovery, doesn't it? Or at least relapse prevention).

What one does with holiday stress is particularly important to a recovering person, because it can mean the difference between life and death. If stress is left unchecked and unmanaged it can set the recovering alcoholic or addict up for relapse.

Stress, in and of itself, does not cause relapse. Not actively taking steps to prevent relapse and to maintain one's spiritual, physical, and emotional health is the leading cause of relapse.

As we become enveloped by "the holidays", the demands for our time, energy, money, and other resources increase by leaps and bounds. Stress is the perception that the supply of time, energy, money, and other resources are insufficient to handle the demand for them. We don't believe that we will be up to the challenge.

That belief may be true unless we make some basic changes to the ways that we deal with the holidays. During this time, normal stressors (e.g., job, family, kids' activities, ailing parents, paying bills) don't go away because it is Christmastime or Thanksgiving.

It seems like there are two mutually exclusive belief systems operating in our thinking. We may act as if we believe that this "special season" is magic, automatically granting to everyone special endowments of more energy, more kindness, more patience and tolerance with others, more money, and more physical and emotional energy. Like Santa's Christmas Eve adventure, time will be suspended for us, so that we may accomplish everything on our

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"to do" list, and have positive energy left over to actually enjoy our families and friends.

Yet the other line of thinking is that we will not have these magical endowments and will not be up to the challenges of the season. This is one reason that people "dread" the holidays. We automatically know realize that more demands will be placed on us. We dread being called upon to do more, spend more, be more. When the season hits, most people already feel "behind" and set out blindly to accomplish these additional challenges without additional resources.

This year truly can be different with a little self-assessment and a little planning. Do two things now:

- 1) Start out making your "Holidays list". List everything that you usually do for the holidays. Don't forget the time that you spend in calling relatives and friends to find out plans, cleaning, cooking, taking things down from the attic to decorate, entertaining, Christmas cards, etc.
- 2) Look at your monthly budget, and make sure that you have all end of year extra expenses covered. Then figure out how much money you can afford to spend for the Holidays - total. Be thinking about how you want to use your financial resources for the Holidays. For example, how much can you afford to spend on gifts, entertaining, travel, etc.

Use these two tasks to help you organize your holiday tasks and your expenditures. These two things will help you to reduce this holiday season.

Reference: Ferguson, Peggy L., 2009, "The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through The Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity" E-book. Hubbard House Publishing, Stillwater, OK 74075.



***This helpful guide for managing holiday stress covers reasons why we experience extra stress during the holidays, how stress can impact addiction recovery, and makes suggestions not only on how to survive holiday stress, but how to move from anxiety and stress into effective problem solving. It Includes worksheets. Although written with the recovering person in mind, it provides helpful information to anyone experiencing "holiday stress".***

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