

Managing Holiday Stress Together An Action Plan for Couples

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

As we get closer to the holidays, do you find yourself getting grumpy, resentful, and short fused? Are you making a list in your mind of the things that your spouse typically does not help you with during the holidays? Are you remembering all the ways that s/he let you down last year or in previous years? Are you blaming your spouse for feeling overwhelmed and stressed out? Do you find yourself getting defensive when s/he asks you a simple question? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you could benefit by communicating with your spouse about managing holiday stress together.

There are a multitude of external stressors that pile up in everyone's life as they scramble to take on additional tasks associated with the holidays. There are just as many internal stressors associated with the holidays. Some of those include unreasonable expectations, loss and unresolved grief, perfectionistic tendencies, irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions, emotional immaturity, addiction and mental health issues--to name but a few.

One of the most distressing is unresolved relationship issues that get embedded into the midst of other holiday stress factors. When you do not believe that you can work together, you may feel compelled to do it all yourself, and to feel resentful. When you believe that your spouse will not help with holiday activities and tasks, you probably don't ask for help, get angry and resentful, and covertly act out your anger.

You may be correct in believing that your spouse will not help or that you cannot effectively work together. You may be approaching this issue in a self-fulfilling prophecy kind of way. If you have rigid ideas or standards about how something "should be done, you may believe that these are universal standards and that there are no other ways of doing things "properly". Since you have given up on the idea of getting help for holiday tasks, you have probably stopped communicating about what you are doing. Many conflicts occur simply because the partners in a relationship do not have the same information.

To reduce your holiday stress, try working together with your spouse for holiday activities and tasks. Even if you have tried before and failed, try these things:

1. Talk with your spouse about holiday activities and get-togethers. Talk about your expectations in regard to family, friends, and coworkers. Make a decision together about which parties, functions, and visits you will attend.
2. Make a list of all the activities and tasks that you each consider important. Keep in mind that you may not have the same list.
3. Make a list of end of year activities and tasks that you usually have to do. Remember that you have a life during the holidays too.
4. Identify any end of year additional expenses. Write those down and take them into consideration for your Holidays Budget.
5. Discuss your finances, identifying in dollars and cents where you stand right now. Identify a projected income and monetary resources during the Holiday spending season.
6. Talk about your financial limitations and define a maximum amount of money you will spend for the holidays.
7. Use a holiday budget. (See The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through the Holidays without Losing Your Sanity or Your Sobriety for a good budget worksheet.) Stick to your budget.
8. Serve as a support person for each other in saying "no", setting boundaries/limits, venting frustrations, regaining perspective, engaging in stress management and self-care activities. Encourage each other to "take a break", "slow down", "just breathe", etc.
9. Continue to communicate with each other. Have executive meetings together. Ask each other for help. Divide up tasks. Report on progress. Reinforce each other's efforts. Remind each other how much you are actually doing or getting done vs. all that "needs to be done". Remind each other that it is ok to eliminate things from your "to do" list.
10. Take time for your relationship. Have dates. Have a couple's feeling meeting daily. Cuddle on the couch. Call each other on the phone just to say

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"hi". You know the things that your spouse needs to feel loved. Do those things.

[The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through the Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity EBook](#)



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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