

## 12 Tips to Get through Family Stress at the Holidays



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The holidays can be stressful for many people, for many different reasons. They tend to tap into our earliest memories, which tend to be our most magical and our most scary. A large number of our most precious and painful life events tend to relate to family, which we can be reminded of during holiday family gatherings. The holidays can make people feel rushed, overwhelmed, lonely, and financially stressed. And in the end, the anticipation can be built to an unachievable expectation by family planning and media hype.

In order to prevent the stress and depression that often descend during the holidays, learn to recognize your holiday stressors, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they overwhelm you. It is important to put things in perspective and remember the holidays are about togetherness. Try these tips to stay happy and healthy this holiday season:

**1. Acknowledge your feelings and triggers.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

**2. Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. It's important to be honest about expectations and reality.

**3. Stick to a budget for food and gifts.** You'll never buy happiness for someone, no matter what your budget is, so keep it stress-free by making a commitment not to spend more than you can afford. Try gift alternatives like making a donation in someone's name to their favorite charity or giving them something you've made. Cookies baked with love really do taste better!

**4. Break up holiday to-do lists by planning ahead** so you don't get overwhelmed. Set aside a specific day for shopping, another for baking and cooking, another for visiting friends, another for decorating the house, etc. Plan your menus and make a shopping list accordingly. This will help last-minute scrambles for forgotten tasks or items. Make sure to include a day for party prep and clean-up.

**5. Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity.

**6. Make time for real fun.** Figure out ways to have fun like having a family game night. Also, include time for yourself. Take care of yourself so you can take care of those you love.

**7. Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community events, religious events, social events, or volunteering opportunities. They can offer support and companionship.

**8. Accept people as they are.** Don't get sucked into conversations about politics, religion, or gossip about other family members. Try to put aside issues for that day, until a more appropriate time to discuss and get into things. The holiday isn't an opportunity to try to change someone.

**9. Be understanding** if others get upset, frustrated, or distressed if something goes wrong. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.

**10. Don't abandon healthy habits.** In the cold weather and shortened daylight hours, continue to get plenty of sleep, physical activity, and healthy meals. Sleep deprivation is a major disturber of people's moods, as is the lack of sunshine and daylight hours.

**11. Take a breather and make some time for yourself.** Just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, will give you a chance to catch your breath and recharge for the things you need to do that day. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to music that calms you. Find an activity that clears your mind, slows your breathing, and restores your inner calm.

**12. Seek professional help if you need it.** If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consider seeing a professional such as a counselor or therapist to help you manage your stress. Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

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