



Handling holiday stress and preserving your well-being

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Each year, the holiday period is described as a time of unparalleled joy.

It's a narrative we know off by heart: a period of wonder, gratitude and togetherness. Behind the lavish feasts and cheerful gatherings hides a more nuanced truth, however; the holiday period is a source of great stress for plenty of people, often revealing the weight of financial pressures, family conflict, and so forth. Holiday celebrations intended to bring fulfillment can sometimes feel taxing on our emotional endurance.

But why do we persist in pretending that it's all perfect? And most significantly, how do we tend to our own needs in the midst of such an altruistic festivity?

The problem of perfectionism

The pursuit of perfection and the high expectations we place upon ourselves often cause nothing but stress. We are fixated on the need to have a 'perfect' holiday celebration.

These days, social media worsens this pressure, distorting our perception of what the holiday should be. We are flooded with embellished pictures that greatly contrast the actual experiences of many. The desire to measure up to these deceptions, and our inability to outdo them, renders us disappointed.

Strangely enough, the mishaps we dread frequently turn into the stories that families cherish, retelling them fondly for years to come.

Why, then, do we put so much effort into warding off the very shortcomings that leave the most lasting memories?

Loosening our grip on perfection frees us to find enjoyment in what we already have, without the urge to rigidly control every aspect of the celebration.

Family conflict

In the midst of holiday gatherings, family dynamics can take an unexpected turn, bringing conflict to the forefront. Year after year, we might find ourselves in awkward situations rooted in long-standing feuds, opposing beliefs and traditions, or continued patterns of dysfunctional behaviour. All of which set the stage for a battle of egos.

How we handle this friction, however, holds the potential for growth.

Humans have a tendency to unconsciously mimic each other's behaviour. Accordingly, we should model the behaviours we want others to display.

Maintaining your composure throughout these high-stress situations sets a standard for how arguments can be handled in a constructive manner. Such behaviour is particularly instrumental for younger family members, who are often attuned to how adults manage stress and discord.

The way you respond provides a live demonstration of conflict resolution skills that others might unconsciously copy.

The art of asking.

Too often, we approach disagreements with the instinct to defend ourselves and press our case with unyielding will. But there are no prizes for 'winning' other than temporary self-satisfaction. Insisting on being correct perpetuates the division and ignores the other person's perspective.

A wiser approach involves giving the other person's narrative the attention it warrants and validating their thoughts and emotions. You don't have to abandon or silence your own outlook; it's about seeking to understand the other's through candid questions and active listening.

→ You cannot read each other's minds.

Take into account that you don't know what story is at the forefront of other people's minds. Every person has their own story about what is relevant and why.

Grasping these different stories can have a profound effect on how you and your family handle the conflict. Take on family conflict with the intention to understand more about what is going on. You should ask open-ended questions that you honestly want to know.

These questions could be asked to support the other person in articulating themselves:

Could you explain further why you feel that way?
What was your intention behind saying/doing that?

Financial struggles

The holiday period is synonymous with the expenditure of funds, whether that be on travel arrangements, food preparation, or presents. Should your bank account already be feeling the pinch, the pressure to satisfy these demands often brings about stress and anxiety.

Surrounded by a culture of consumerism, we might feel the need to attain the approval of others through material possessions. We are harassed with advertisements that swear to give us fulfillment, whilst deliberately feeding our sense of inadequacy to keep us yearning for more. But in following these standards, we are abandoning the very things that bring contentment.

1. Have realistic expectations on what you can afford.

The straightforward approach to managing festive expenses is figuring out what you can realistically afford. Work out your average outgoings each month, and subtract these from your earnings. Set yourself a fixed limit for your festive expenses. Take into consideration what you cherish most about holiday celebrations, and find alternatives to high-cost purchases.

2. Practice gratitude.

In times of financial stress, practicing gratitude can act as a grounding force – bringing our attention to what really matters. Instead of measuring the holiday period by material possessions, gratitude encourages us to acknowledge what we already have – our health, the intangible support of loved ones, the natural world and wildlife that surrounds us, and so much more.

Pausing each day to cherish these blessings can alleviate the weight of financial pressures and strengthen our emotional resilience.

Whilst at a social gathering, you could bring forward a modest but profound gratitude activity:

- Provide each person with a slip of paper and pen, and ask them to write down one thing they appreciate about another person in the room.
- It could be a thoughtful action, a characteristic you look up to, or a fond memory.
- Have these slips of paper gathered into a box or jar, and take turns reading aloud each piece of gratitude.
- Doing this activity brings our attention to the bonds and togetherness the group has, and away from the material expectations of society.

The burden of busyness

The holiday period can be filled with a hectic bustle, so much so that being overworked seems inevitable. We are surrounded by high expectations and numerous obligations. We are conditioned to please others, to say yes to things we do not want to do. But sometimes, we must safeguard our own needs and desires.

Evaluate how much time and energy you are willing to devote to each of your calendar arrangements.

Pause to ask yourself whether each planned activity seems manageable, and whether it supports your greater good. We consistently underestimate how much time and effort tasks will take: a cognitive quirk known as the planning fallacy. Having an outside perspective, a loved one who has regard for your best interest, can support you with doing this..

Saying no does not have to be harsh or a complete abdication of responsibility. Instead of bluntly turning down an event, having a suggestion ready for an alternative could be more practical.

→ You might not want to take on all the cooking responsibilities at a family gathering, for example. In such a situation, it could work well to ask each guest to contribute a dish, spreading the effort amongst everyone.

Find time to do nothing.

Amidst the turmoil of perpetual demands and distractions, the thought of doing absolutely nothing can seem unsettling, almost irresponsible. Still, it is through this idleness that we can find mental composure.

Taking just five minutes of our day to sit in solitude, to separate ourselves from the stimulation of the world around us, gives us time to decompress.