

THERAPY MATTERS: Holiday Stress

By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

‘Tis the season to be jolly..... and anything less is simply not acceptable! What pressure we put on ourselves. The expectations that the holidays are joyous occasions full of family harmony and togetherness can quickly backfire and become a time of misery instead. This contrast between the anticipated good times and the cold reality of the day when it arrives can create turmoil and absolutely ruin the possibility of fond memories. Holidays can be stressful, indeed. But there are ways to minimize potential disaster by having realistic expectations and actively managing the stress that seems to be inherent in the holiday season.

A good place to start is being able to identify what situation creates the most stress. Money worries and over-commitments are two areas where it seems nearly everyone struggles. Setting a realistic budget and saving in advance of the holidays seems basic enough, but the real key to managing holiday spending is to avoid being caught up in the “buy buy buy.....save save save” mentality of the season. “Black Friday” deals that seem too good to be true and newspapers stuffed with the latest and best holiday sale are marketing ploys designed to wear down our reasoning such that we feel that we almost need to SPEND money in order to SAVE it.

This is not to say that there aren’t good deals to be had. We know many families that view the holidays as the ideal time for stocking up on clothing essentials or making that “big ticket” purchase. However, a good mental exercise to engage in is to ask yourself if you can recall last season’s gifts. If you, your spouse or children have difficulty with this, it might suggest that you are too caught up in the moment and spending recklessly just so there will be another present under the tree to unwrap.

When it comes to time commitments, the key is to not bite off more than you can chew. You may not be able to commit to every holiday party, and you may have to choose between home-baked cookies and handmade cards. The other point is to remember that this is supposed to be fun. What are your favorite aspects of the holidays and what do you enjoy the most? This can be a great topic for family discussion. Over-commitments can lead to burn out, resentment, and frustration, resulting in the magic of the holidays being lost.

Of course the biggest stressor of all may involve the extended family. Holiday gatherings are breeding grounds for opening old wounds, such as how Mom always seems to favor Brother, or how Sister always manages to get the last word in. These things may sound trite, but the pain can run deep. Celebrations can become particularly problematic when there are clashing ideologies such as contrasting political or religious beliefs. Once again, the solution lies in advance planning and realistic expectations. Knowing which

topics to avoid at the dinner table can work wonders, and a key point to remember is that it always takes two to engage. It may take you biting your lip when Uncle Max makes his offensive comments, but it may preserve harmony in the moment. We recommend that you repeat this mantra: “this too shall pass”, and remember to look at the bigger picture.

The loss of a loved one can be felt acutely during the holiday season, and this can also add to stress and sadness. It may be the first holiday season without Mom or it might be the 10th, but somehow this is the time that you miss her the most. We encourage families to acknowledge the losses in their midst, and pay tribute to loved ones who have passed on. Perhaps it is a special toast or the lighting of a memorial candle, or perhaps it is carrying on the tradition of Grandma’s Famous Homemade Stuffing or Uncle Steve’s Pecan Pie. If involving the entire family feels too painful, then at least take time privately for yourself to remember your loved one and honor their memory.

And finally, above all, remember to take care of yourself. The temptations to overindulge are many during the holiday season, but the collective impact of this can leave us feeling run down and out of sorts. So remember to eat healthfully in the midst of Thanksgiving gluttony and holiday sweets. Don’t abandon your exercise routine despite the extra tasks of shopping and office parties. Watch your alcohol intake, particularly if family conflict is an issue. Come January, you will be grateful that you did, and we are fairly certain that it will only add to your overall enjoyment of this time of year. You will also be able to look forward to next year’s celebrations with anticipation instead of dread. Happy holidays, everyone!

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