

# HOLIDAY-RELATED STRESS

BY

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WHenever holidays occur, they typically carry a mixed blessing. For many, the holidays bring good cheer, family togetherness, fond reminiscences, and the rekindling of old friendships. Unfortunately, it's also a time when added stressors abound. Common annoyances include increased traffic, a dearth of parking, more crowds, long shopping lines, stores running out of merchandise, and added financial demands. In addition, some folks have the added burden of loved ones who have either passed away or who can't be with them due to jobs, marriage, and/or military service. For another growing segment of our society where separation, divorce, and remarriage are becoming increasingly prevalent, a variety of family-based stressors also contaminates otherwise festive seasons. While most of these can't be eliminated, there are methods to minimize their negativity.

As anyone who lives in the greater Atlanta area can attest, traffic in this city is frequently frustrating at best. With the added number of cars on the highways during the holidays, this trend is magnified. In addition, more people are headed for one of the many shopping centers in this city, overcrowding even the larger malls that are becoming unable to adequately handle the increased demand for parking spaces. Inside the stores, overcrowding, long lines, less availability of clerks, longer times waiting to be seated or served at various eating facilities, and/or desired items selling out are the order of the day. If the primary shopper is an adult with children whose coping skills are understandably less well-developed than their adult

COUNTERPARTS, THIS EXPERIENCE CAN BECOME DOWNRIGHT HEINOUS...BOTH TO THE ACCOMPANYING ADULT AND TO OTHER SHOPPERS WHO ARE IN EARSHOT OF THE YOUNG CHILD'S PROTESTATIONS. SEVERAL THINGS THAT CAN BE DONE TO ALLEVIATE SOME OF THESE SOURCES OF ANNOYANCE AND INCONVENIENCE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

1. MAKE A LIST OF POTENTIAL GIFTS AND OBTAIN THEM ON YOUR REGULAR SHOPPING OUTINGS EARLY IN THE YEAR. IF YOU'RE WAITING FOR SALES, THOSE CAN OFTEN BE FOUND AT OTHER, LESS BUSY "MINOR" HOLIDAYS AND THROUGH SPECIALS THAT MANY STORES RUN THROUGHOUT THE YEAR WHEN THE SHEER NUMBERS OF CARS AND PEOPLE AREN'T SO VOLUMINOUS.

2. SHOP ON-LINE AND THROUGH MAIL-ORDER CATALOGUES. WITH THE PROLIFERATION OF WEB SITES, MAIL-ORDER SERVICES, AND ON-LINE SHOPPING, THIS OUTLET IS BECOMING AN INCREASINGLY VIABLE AND POPULAR ALTERNATIVE.

3. IF YOU SHOP IN THE CONVENTIONAL MANNER, DO SO DURING THE WEEK (AND NOT AFTER WORK OR DURING LUNCH HOURS) IF POSSIBLE. SHOULD THIS NOT BE A VIABLE OPTION AND YOU ARE FORCED TO SHOP ON THE WEEKENDS, DO SO EITHER VERY EARLY IN THE MORNING OR LATER IN THE EVENING. ANOTHER POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE IS TO GIVE A TRUSTWORTHY SIGNIFICANT OTHER YOUR SHOPPING LIST. IF YOU MUST TAKE A CHILD WITH YOU SHOPPING, SET A LIMITED TIME TO BE OUT WITH HIM/HER SO AS NOT TO TIRE THE CHILD. YOU MAY ALSO WISH TO TAKE ALONG SOME FAVORITE TOYS TO HELP HIM/HER PASS THE TIME SHOULD A WAIT OCCUR.

4. IF YOU MUST BE OUT AT THE PEAK TIMES OF HOLIDAY CACOPHONY, ACKNOWLEDGE TO YOURSELF IN ADVANCE THAT YOU WILL LIKELY HAVE TO BE INCONVENIENCED AND ACCEPT THAT FACT. ALLOW YOURSELF EXTRA TIME TO DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO WHILE SHOPPING, REMEMBERING NOT TO OVERSCHEDULE YOUR ACTIVITIES ON THOSE DAYS. IN ADDITION, YOU CAN STRENGTHEN YOUR INTERNAL COPING MUSCLES BY REMINDING YOURSELF THAT IN SPITE OF ANY UNDESIRED SITUATIONS THAT MIGHT OCCUR THAT YOU ARE QUITE COMPETENT TO

COPE WITH THE SCENARIO AND THAT IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD IF THINGS DON'T GO ACCORDING TO PLANS.

5. IF IT'S FEASIBLE, YOU MAY WISH TO TAKE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TO ELIMINATE THE TRAFFIC AND PARKING PROBLEMS.

6. PLAN YOUR EXPENDITURES WELL IN ADVANCE OF THE HOLIDAY SEASON AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE AND STICK WITHIN YOUR BUDGET. ONE WAY TO GET A "BALL PARK" IDEA OF WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT TO SPEND IS BASING IT ON LAST YEAR'S SPENDING PLUS 10% – 20% (DEPENDING ON INFLATION AND THE EXTRA PEOPLE ADDED TO YOUR LIST). YOU MIGHT START HOLDING OUT A SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY FROM EACH PAYCHECK FOR THE END OF THE YEAR TO MINIMIZE THE "CRUNCH" SPENT DURING MAJOR HOLIDAY SEASONS.

7. GO WITH FRIENDS TO HELP PASS THE TIME. IF YOU ALSO TAKE CHILDREN WITH YOU, TRY TO PICK FRIENDS WHO ALSO HAVE CHILDREN SO THAT THEY MIGHT BE ABLE TO AMUSE EACH OTHER WHILE THE ADULTS ARE TAKING CARE OF THEIR BUSINESS.

WHILE FAMILIES ARE USUALLY A SOURCE OF COMFORT DURING THIS TIME, THEY CAN ALSO BE A SOURCE OF PROBLEMS RANGING FROM INCONVENIENCE TO DYSFUNCTION. MARRIED COUPLES SOMETIMES RUN INTO THE PROBLEM OF PICKING THE "IN LAW" FAMILY WITH WHICH THEY WILL SPEND THE HOLIDAYS. WITH A GENEROUS PORTION OF COMPROMISE AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE COUPLE AND THEIR RESPECTIVE FAMILY OF ORIGIN MEMBERS, MOST LOGISTICS CAN BE SUCCESSFULLY TRAVERSED. OFTEN TIMES, THE COUPLE WILL OPT TO SPEND ONE HOLIDAY WITH ONE SIDE OF THE FAMILY AND ANOTHER HOLIDAY WITH THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FAMILY. IF THIS BECOMES TOO BURDENSOME DUE TO GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS, A LESSER-DESIRED OPTION MIGHT BE TO USE FREQUENT PHONE LIAISONS. OTHER COUPLES WITH FINANCIALLY SOUND PARENTS COULD EITHER COME THEMSELVES TO THE COUPLE'S HOME OR PAY FOR THE COUPLE TO COME TO THEM. AN ALTERNATIVE TO THIS STRATEGY WITH BOTH FAMILIES LIVING IN CLOSE GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY IS TO SPEND PART OF THE DAY WITH ONE

PARTNER'S FAMILY AND THE OTHER PART OF THE DAY WITH THE OTHER PARTNER'S FAMILY. FOR INDIVIDUALS IN THE MILITARY WHO CAN'T GET HOME FOR A MYRIAD OF REASONS, POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES MIGHT INCLUDE PHONE LIAISONS, VARIOUS INTERNET CHATTING/VIDEO DEVICES, AND/OR A VIDEOTAPE THAT IS SENT TO THE FAMILY (AND VICE VERSA).

ON THE MORE SERIOUS END OF THE SPECTRUM, A CORNUCOPIA OF FEELINGS THAT INCLUDES LOSS, GUILT, ANGER, GRIEF, ABANDONMENT, CONFUSION, DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, LONELINESS, RESENTMENT, AND BETRAYAL CAN SURFACE AS A RESULT OF SEPARATION/DIVORCE OR DEATH OF A LOVED ONE. THESE EMOTIONS ARE PARTICULARLY ACUTE WHEN THE DEATH OR DIVORCE/SEPARATION OCCURRED DURING A PREVIOUS HOLIDAY TIME, HAS RECENTLY OCCURRED, OR IS CURRENTLY IN PROCESS. WHEN SEPARATION/DIVORCE OCCURS BETWEEN A COUPLE WHO HAVE CHILDREN OR ADOLESCENTS, THESE OFFSPRING ALSO BEAR THE BURDEN OF THE BREAKUP. DISAGREEMENTS OFTEN ENSUE WHEN ISSUES SURFACE OF WITH WHOM THE OFFSPRING WILL SPEND AND/OR HOW MUCH TIME ON WHICH DAYS OF THE HOLIDAY SEASON, WITH THE CHILD OR TEEN OFTEN FEELING "SANDWICHED" BETWEEN PARENTAL STRIFE. WITH MULTIPLE OFFSPRING, IT SOMETIMES BECOMES A FIGHT OVER WHICH CHILD OR ADOLESCENT WILL SPEND HOW MUCH TIME WITH WHICH PARENT ON WHAT DAY. WHEN REMARRIAGE WITH ONE OR BOTH MEMBERS OF THE FORMER COUPLE HAS ALSO OCCURRED, ANOTHER POTENTIAL COMPLICATION SURFACES. IT IS BEST TO PLAN FOR THESE ISSUES WELL IN ADVANCE OF THE HOLIDAYS. THIS OBVIOUSLY REQUIRES SERIOUS EFFORT ON, COMMUNICATION WITH, AND COOPERATION BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF THE FORMER COUPLE AND/OR CURRENT PARTNERS OF THE REMARRIAGE DYAD. SADLY, THIS MUST HAPPEN BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO WOULD USUALLY JUST AS SOON NOT EVEN SEE OR TALK TO EACH OTHER, MUCH LESS COOPERATE IN A SEMI-CIVIL MANNER. NEVERTHELESS, THIS MUST BE ACCOMPLISHED WHENEVER MINOR OFFSPRING ARE INVOLVED. IN ADDITION, IT IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS TO ALWAYS BE KEPT

OUT OF ANY PARENTAL OR ADULT MAYHEM AND CONFLICT. WITH THE NOTION OF DOING WHAT'S IN THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD/TEEN AS THE FOREMOST CAVEAT, MOST OF THE "HOLIDAY CUSTODY" ISSUES CAN BE IRONED OUT WITH DETERMINATION, DILIGENCE, RESPECT, RATIONALITY, AND PATIENCE. IF PARENTS AND/OR CURRENT PARTNERS FEEL UNABLE TO DO THIS ON THEIR OWN, THEY SHOULD SEEK PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE AS TO HOW TO ACCOMPLISH THIS IN THE LEAST DISRUPTIVE, MOST COOPERATIVE MANNER POSSIBLE. AS MOST MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ARE OVERBURDENED DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON, IT IS AGAIN IMPERATIVE FOR THE FORMER COUPLE TO ENGAGE IN THIS COUNSELING PROCESS EARLY. FIND A NEUTRAL PROFESSIONAL WITH WHOM TO WORK, RATHER THAN TRYING TO USE EITHER PARTNER'S RESPECTIVE INDIVIDUAL THERAPISTS (IF THEY ARE OR HAVE BEEN IN COUNSELING). ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE IS TO UTILIZE THEIR OFFSPRING'S THERAPIST (IF THIS IS THE CASE) TO ASSIST WITH THIS PROCESS, AS THIS PROFESSIONAL WOULD BE AWARE OF THE CHILD'S/TEEN'S TEMPERAMENT AND WHAT SORTS OF INTERVENTIONS MIGHT BE LEAST UPSETTING. WHEN DEALING WITH THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE OVER THE HOLIDAYS, SURVIVORS NEED TO KEEP SOME SIMPLE IDEAS IN MIND AND FOLLOW SOME BASIC GUIDELINES:

1. ACCEPT THAT IT WILL LIKELY BE DIFFICULT AND THAT IT'S OK NOT TO FEEL "IN THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT" ALL THE TIME. GRIEF AND MOURNING ARE COMPLETELY NORMAL STATES THAT CAN LAST UP TO SEVERAL YEARS. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE FOR THE FIRST COUPLE OF SEASONS, IF THE LOSS IS RECENT, OR IF THE LOSS OCCURRED DURING A PREVIOUSLY SIMILAR HOLIDAY. SHOULD THE PROCESS BECOME OVERWHELMING, SERIOUSLY CONSIDER OBTAINING PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE. IF YOU'RE ALREADY IN COUNSELING, DON'T CURTAIL YOUR SESSIONS DURING THE HOLIDAYS. IF SUPPORT GROUPS EXIST IN YOUR AREA THAT ADDRESS THE ISSUES WITH WHICH YOU ARE STRUGGLING, ENTERTAIN ATTENDING ONE OR MORE OF THEM IN ADDITION TO WHATEVER INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING IN WHICH YOU MIGHT BE ENGAGED.

2. GET AS MUCH FAMILIAL, SPIRITUAL, COMMUNITY, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AS POSSIBLE. THIS ASPECT CANNOT BE OVEREMPHASIZED.

3. AVOID EXCESSIVE SUBSTANCE CONSUMPTION THAT WILL ENHANCE UNTOWARD EMOTIONALITY OR IMPAIR YOUR ABILITY TO SUCCESSFULLY COPE WITH THE SEASON. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE OF SUBSTANCES THAT EITHER LOWER/DEPRESS THE NERVOUS SYSTEM (E.G., ALCOHOL) OR THOSE THAT UNDULY AGITATE (E.G., COCAINE) THE NERVOUS SYSTEM.

4. PLAN YOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS SO THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TOO MUCH "DOWN" OR ALONE TIME. MAKE USE OF SOME OF YOUR "DOWN" TIME TO DO CHORES OR PROJECTS YOU'VE BEEN PROCRASTINATING UNDERTAKING OR FINISHING. ALSO REMEMBER TO TAKE EXTRA CARE TO BE GOOD TO YOURSELF, WHETHER THAT'S EXERCISING, TAKING A BUBBLE BATH, LISTENING TO YOUR FAVORITE MUSIC, OR MEDITATING.

WITH A LITTLE PLANNING AND FORETHOUGHT, POTENTIAL ISSUES THAT MAY ARISE TO CONTAMINATE THESE NORMALLY REWARDING TIMES CAN BE AVERTED OR, AT THE VERY LEAST, MINIMIZED. IN DOING SO, THERE IS AN INCREASED LIKELIHOOD THAT THE HOLIDAYS CAN BE REWARDING EXPERIENCES FOR EVERYONE.