

From family divisions and financial problems to the loss of a loved one, the holidays can be a difficult time for many people. **Dr. Suzy Weidenfelder** offers some advice on making it through the season.

**F**OR many of us, the holidays are a time of stress and struggle – not joy. Life can be challenging enough during the rest of the year, but holiday time can bring to the fore longstanding difficulties that occur in many families.

While the holidays are intended as a time of family gathering and reconnection, they are also a time of increased financial, emotional, and marital or relationship hardships. Some of the more common difficulties people face at this time of year include:

Dealing with the loss of a loved one. The first holiday season after the passing of a spouse, parent, child or close family member is always bittersweet. Though their loss is felt throughout the year, this time of year typically comes with many family traditions and routines that no longer feel complete without their presence.

While maintaining old traditions, it may also be helpful to get through the season by starting new traditions in memory of the missing loved one. For example, many parents who have lost their children buy toys appropriate to the age their child may be and donate them to children in need, or



# A Blue? Christmas.

# What to do when holiday stress gets the better of you

IF you feel you are slipping and holiday stress is getting the better of you, here is a quick strategy to help get a grip on your emotional rollercoaster and feel more confident and capable to deal with the holidays ahead.

**THE STOP SIGN.** Once our brain takes off, it is really hard to gain control again. That feeling that your mind is racing, or that you can't stop worrying, maybe you're so distracted that you drive all the way home and don't remember how you got there, or get to the grocery store and can't remember what you came for, or maybe you are tossing and turning in bed for hours wishing for an off switch to your thinking, or at work unable to stay on task.

The truth is you can't prevent these thoughts from entering your consciousness. But you can control what you do with the thought once it appears. The key is to get your own attention! Try picturing a huge red STOP sign. See it clearly in your mind's eye, Big Bold and Red. Think about what the symbol represents and say it with firm authority and conviction, aloud or in your head. STOP! And get your own attention.

**CALM BREATHING.** Now that you have got your own attention and recognize that chasing your thoughts and replaying them over and over in every scenario does not solve any problems or lessen your stress, try to regulate your emotions and bring down your level of emotional arousal. When we are really

worked up, anxious, worried, stressed out, angry, etc., our level of emotional arousal is pretty high. If we pay close attention to our body at this time, we will notice that our heart is probably pumping quicker, our breathing is more shallow and rapid, our stomach may feel queasy, we may be sweating more, shaking more, a little bit dizzy. These symptoms and others all happen when our emotional arousal level is high.

Don't forget there is a body to brain connection. When our brain is racing, our body is racing too. But while it is hard to control our thoughts, it is not as hard to control our bodies. If the body is calm, the brain will follow suit. So, once you get your own attention, the key is to focus on calming your inner self.

We do this through regulating our oxygen intake. Sit comfortably or lie down. Focus completely on your breathing. Inhale slowly through your nose. As you do this, feel the air filling up your lower lungs and abdominal cavity. While you inhale, try counting slowly to the number four. Hold your breath for two seconds, then breathe out just as slowly, counting to four once again. Pause and take another breath. Try doing this abdominal breathing at minimum three times in a row, a few times a day.

The goal is to slow down your system. Lower your arousal level and gain control over your emotional state.

**GROUNDING.** By now you have got your own attention, calmed your body



**It's easy to fall prey to anxiety, stress and depression if you don't pay extra attention to self-care during the holiday season.**

and taken charge of your thoughts. The next step in getting a grip is to ground yourself. Grounding can be thought of as bringing yourself back down to earth in a strong, confident manner, preparing yourself to focus and deal with the next thing coming your way.

One common grounding exercise is to take your feet and push them really hard into the floor. As you are doing this, feel the strength in your muscles all the way up to your back. Feel the pressure in your feet. Use all your senses, focusing on strength and confidence. Imagine yourself to be the Hulk, super strong and powerful, or like an enormous oak tree – thick, solid and deep rooted.

**SELF-TALK & CHOICE.** Now that you have got a grip of both brain and body, feeling confident and stronger, remind yourself of all the positive and healthy things you have been working on and trying to achieve. Take this opportunity to make a choice. A choice to do

raise money on behalf of the family member for donation.

**Financial burden of the holiday season.** Strained marriages that are additionally affected by financial problems typically suffer at this time of year when parents are trying to meet the

expectations and demands of their children's wish lists. Going further into debt by buying expensive toys and gadgets is not the answer, and will likely cause even greater marital discord when the credit card bills show up in January.

Try setting limits with each other through

open communication, start shopping early to spread out the financial burden over a period of time, be creative in gift ideas, make a pact to only spend what you have.

**Dealing with difficult family members.** This is one of biggest challenges at this time of year. Many of



things differently. A choice to change your usual path. A choice to face your emotions, your in-laws, your spouse, your finances, your worries, your life, in a different way.

To learn more strategies to cope with any mental health, mood, anxiety, relationship, stress, anger or addiction issues, it is helpful to see a psychologist. They are trained to help you identify your patterns, reduce symptom distress, and promote change and growth in a healthier manner. To find a psychologist near you, go to the College of Psychologists of Ontario's website at [www.cpo.on.ca](http://www.cpo.on.ca).

Overall, recognize that the holidays are rarely as perfect as they seem on TV or in Christmas-themed movies. For many people, they are a combination of challenging, uncomfortable and joyful times. Be realistic with yourself and try to have a good holiday season.

us struggle when having to face formal family dinners with in-laws and extended family. The same issues arise year after year when dealing with family members who know just how to push your buttons, or always want and expect things done in a certain way. Many families just wait

# 2/3 Ad

for it, expect it and react to it in the usual stressed out, chaotic or angry manner.

Instead, why not tackle this from a new perspective. If we are already expecting something to happen, doesn't it make more sense to try and avert the situation before it occurs? Try and control your own reaction, or use humour to guide your way through it. Recognize that people will likely remain the same; take this opportunity to expect it and deal with it differently.

For example, support your spouse in a new way, plan strategically for the event, and practice a new and healthier response. Why be surprised and angry by something old and expected? Mary, for example, recognizes that her dad pokes fun at every boyfriend she brings to the house. This pushes her buttons and she reacts either in an aggressive or defensive manner, which always makes for an uncomfortable family dinner. This year Mary has decided to ignore her father's comments, let her boyfriend stand up for himself, and change the subject as quickly

as she can, instead of reacting and yelling about something she cannot stop but can already predict will occur.

**Physical demands.** We work hard all year to maintain healthy and balanced lifestyles, only to give up our routine, structure and self-care when holiday season comes around. Lack of self-care, added to increased workload around the house, greater shopping and financial strain, end of year work stressors, changes in routine, preparing for a vacation and so on make it even more challenging to stay in the holiday spirit and avoid meltdowns or health setbacks.

Make sure that at this time of year, you are vigilant about taking care of yourself, asking for help, delegating chores, maintaining some form of routine and finding time to relax and enjoy yourself.

**Mental health disorders.** For people suffering from mental health issues, the holidays can be even more troublesome and trigger symptoms or a relapse of anxiety, depression, stress,

anger, substance abuse and eating disorders. The shorter days, limited sunlight, and the cold weather transitions are often challenging changes for many people who struggle with maintaining a balanced mood and positive outlook.

So how do we make it through? Just like coping with other stressful times of year, it is important to pay extra attention to self-care. Focus on healthy sleeping and eating routines, time management strategies and effective communication skills. Remember to acknowledge your feelings and reach out for support.

Try and use this time to set aside your differences and plan ahead together. Be sure to practice your assertiveness skills to just say no and ask for help. Don't stop your healthy habits and self-care routines, give yourself a break, and most importantly, seek professional help when needed. **W**

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1/2 Ad