Stress for the Holidays

Eggnog toasting, turkey carvings, tree hunting, candle lighting, and hall decking are all associated with the time between Thanksgiving and New Year’s, but for some Americans, this “most wonderful time of the year,” can bring stress and even depression.

A lot of factors can contribute to holiday stress. During the holidays, when most people’s schedules are turned upside down with real and perceived responsibilities, stress can turn into holiday depression.

“People have problems when they try to control the season too much to make it a perfect remembrance,” says Devin Byrd, chair of the department of Behavioral Sciences at South University — Savannah, Georgia. “It can be a huge letdown if you set your sights too high and you’re not able to accomplish.”

According to Mental Health America, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping all people live mentally healthier lives, stress around the holidays can come in a number of different forms, including:

- Financial
- Too many activities
- Time with family
- Over-indulgence
- Being alone
- Memories

A lot of these causes of stress can come from having unreasonable expectations for the holidays, and trying to force friends and family into conforming to the concept of “the perfect day.” To avoid this, Byrd believes it’s important to be able to compromise and go with the holiday flow.

“Be flexible and understand that people need to make adjustments to schedules,” he says. “There are times when things don’t go according to plan and you have to be flexible. It can cause a lot of turmoil or it can cause a lot of stress if people don’t acquiesce.”

When shooting for that perfect moment, sometimes technology like digital cameras and social media sites causes the photographer, web poster, or Tweeter to miss the holiday, which can lead to disappointment, stress, and even depression.

“Technology is something that can be good to look back on these moments, but you can use it too much,” Byrd says.

Holiday Stress

Clinical social worker and holiday stress expert Mark Gorkin (aka The Stress Doc) says the main holiday stressors are the four Fs: Fantasy, Family, Food, and Finances.

He believes that because of the way the holidays are always portrayed in movies and on TV families can never live up to the “fantasy holiday.”

“The media paints this picture,” Gorkin says. “How many people have Clydesdale horses running through their front lawn?”

Part of this fantasy world is always unattainable because of family dynamics and the reality of what families are in the 21st Century.

“That’s the new reality,” Gorkin says. “There are a lot of blended families.”

Because of the complications that exist within so many families, getting together for the holidays can be more like a visit to the set of Dr. Phil instead of the Waltons.
“If your family gathering is turning into a family therapy session, it’s not the right time for it,” Gorkin says.

When things aren’t going so well, and family fights and disappointment reach new heights, many people turn to food for comfort, and what better time of year to stumble upon a plate of freshly made cookies than around the holidays.

But it’s not just binging in the kitchen that get people in trouble around the holidays – department store binges can also lead to holiday stress. Because of the pressure to bring new and exciting presents to the table, and the realization of end of year earnings coming at roughly the same time, many holiday shoppers can fall into a real funk.

Gorkin recommends the gift of togetherness over the tangible holiday gifts that so many Americans get carried away with each year.

“Try to put presence ahead of presents,” Gorkin says.

**Holiday Stress Busters**

Although there are a lot of ways to get into a funk over the holiday season, Byrd says there are few good ways to avoid the holiday depression pitfalls.

“The main way is connecting with someone [you] trust,” Byrd says.

“Take time for yourself to take in the good moments that are taking place,” he adds.

Although these symptoms can be debilitating during the holidays, for most people they fade once the holidays are over, but if not, a doctor should be consulted.

“If in a couple of weeks you’re still down; that’s when I would say ’go to a professional,’” Gorkin says.

Whether you hate eggnog, are allergic to garland, think turkey is for the birds, or can’t keep candles lit for eight straight nights, know that it only lasts for a couple of weeks, and that the holidays are only once a year.