



Overwhelmed by the holidays?

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

The holidays – special meals, time with family, vacation from work, awe-inspiring prayer – everyone is happy at holiday time, right? Wrong. Holidays have the potential to be sad and stressful. Very stressful. A time of reflection and renewal, and the perfect opportunity to look after yourself spiritually, physically and emotionally, yet we often get so bogged down by the wrong things that we fail to prioritize and spend time on what's really important.

So whether your issue is your mother who criticizes everything you do or nags your children constantly, the splitting up of families because it is or isn't your year to have the kids, preparing food for fussy young eaters along with four different allergy or diet requests, or the empty chair because someone special who was there last year is no longer with you, you can choose whether you anticipate the coming holidays with anxiety and dread or a sense of warmth, desire and excitement.

The holidays can affect our well-being in so many ways – both positive and negative. Conversely, how we think, feel and embrace the pain or pleasure of memories of years gone by will impact our ability to create a meaningful and enjoyable time for ourselves and our loved ones.

In large part, whether you see the holidays as joyful or depressing is within your control. While you may opt to just do whatever it takes to “get through” this seemingly endless round of holidays, you can do better than just being in survival mode, counting the moments till the kids go back to school and you go back to work.

“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail” is the mantra for this period. Life can feel overwhelming with too little time to do what you'd like to do to make the holiday meaningful and fun, and too many demands or difficult situations to deal with. The key to getting through a tough moment is to anticipate what

the situation might be like, be mindful of the potential difficulties, and then draw up a game plan for success. This is true whether you are dealing with meal after meal while still sticking to a diet, arriving at the table feeling rested and excited after preparing 20 different holiday dishes, or talking to your mom after she has insulted your daughter, who has run off.

Start by defining your goals and ensure that they are clear and realistic. What needs to be accomplished and how can you achieve it?

Many issues that cause stress are time-related. There may simply not be enough time to do the things you'd like, so proper preparation involves prioritizing. Take a moment to visualize success. What would you like to have happen? Picture it going well and then ask yourself what's needed to make that happen. In other words, how can you plan for it?

If, for example, this is the year that you are tired of the same old recipes and you want to try out five new ones and make a new, time-consuming dessert, you need to allocate a time for each to be done, using resources such as your children's help or freezing food in advance to make this happen.

If you've gone way over budget in previous years, look for ways to cut costs. If you know that your mother sets your daughter off, have a talk with both of them ahead of time and strategize for the anticipated difficult moments. Imagine and role-play the most outlandish insult you can think of, teach your daughter how to respond and arrange a secret signal that enables the two of you to meet in the kitchen to do damage control as necessary.

Don't expect perfection. Whatever your goals, recognize that this year may not be just like previous years; holidays evolve, and this is okay. Find the joy in this moment, today. There really is plenty of it. As much as we think we can plan every facet of our lives, we really can't. At some point, step back, relax and enjoy watching things unfold, without taking life too seriously.

The spirit of the holidays involves getting in touch with your feelings. You may find that this is the time

you're most aware of unresolved family issues and loss. Whether it is being away from family or friends, or others with whom you may have shared past holidays and who are no longer here, you may feel more lonely or sad right now, and that's okay. There is no *one* way that you *should* feel.

This may be the time to let others know how you feel and derive support from the community embrace by reaching out to others. This may be the year to accept the invitation that in the past you have turned down.

Taking the time to look after yourself communicates the right message to your loved ones. To stay focused on all that has to be done, keep up the usual routines that give you sanity. Whether it's exercise, sleeping properly or diet, these all contribute to your overall physical and mental health. Don't forget also to make time for a little calm in the storm of frenetic holiday preparation. Even a short break to enjoy some quiet “me” time with a bubble bath, a walk or even quiet meditation or prayer will greatly enhance your productivity.

Caring for yourself sometimes requires being assertive. If you cannot take something on without it causing you more stress, simply say “no.” You need not explain.

Remember, some stress is fine and actually helps you accomplish all that you do. If, however, you feel persistent symptoms of stress, find yourself feeling sad and angry, and have somatic complaints that don't seem to go away, listen to your body and see someone to get yourself back on track.

During this time of forgiveness, for both yourself and others, remember: If you get it wrong, there is always next year.

Wishing you a healthy and happy New Year. ■

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