

How to Cope with Christmas Stress!

© Terri Sheldon and Dr Peta Stapleton 2008

The Lakeside Rooms, Suite 9 North Building,
34-36 Glenferrie Dr, Robina QLD 4226.

Christmas can be a time of year for people which is full of happiness and love and/or full of stress and sadness. It's a time when people often rush around, try to fit too many things into their time, spend more than they can afford and overindulge in food and alcohol.

It is also a time of year that poses many traditions and rules on people. There is a common belief that because it is Christmas time, you should spend time with your immediate family—whether you like them or not.

We would like to challenge this belief at some level and highlight the importance of thinking about the rules in your own family. If it is expected that you spend time with the family, perhaps ask yourself whether this is a helpful tradition to have and whether it is one you would like to pass on to your own family. Some families like to put all differences aside for this one day, and maybe that tradition works for some. It might not work for others.

Secondly, examine your own thoughts about the Christmas season and the big day itself. Do you anticipate a stressful time, fraught with family issues and difficulty? Or do you look forward to the season with happiness? It has been suggested that our thoughts drive everything else (our feelings and behaviours!) so the right frame of mind seems vital. If you find you DO think about Christmas as a stressful event and day, is there anyway you can reframe this for yourself, so you can change your feelings? Perhaps you could think of Christmas as time off work (which might be more relaxing!) or the chance to catch up on tasks you have been too busy to do throughout the year—again this might help the pressure of thinking of it as stressful.

Despite the above, many people still find dealing with Christmas very difficult and the following tips may help get you through the season.

Family Stressors

Many people have positive family experiences at Christmas but can still find the financial and time pressures difficult to manage. If Christmas is a stressful time with many unresolved family issues arising, these can be worsened by overindulgence in alcohol and rich food. Christmas can be a dreaded time.

Families who are separated or divorced, have recently lost a loved one or are blended step families can have more pressures associated with the arrangements around Christmas. Even families who generally get on well can find it difficult to negotiate the arrangements with all the family and in-laws.

The key to minimising stress and maximising the positive times is communication between all parties about expectations, presents, food, and related costs.

Tips:

- Be realistic about what to expect. If your family has been feuding for some time don't expect it to stop for Christmas. In fact with the imbibing of alcohol this is likely to worsen. If you are concerned or anticipating difficulty, minimise your own alcohol intake so that you are as clear headed as possible. If things get out of hand be prepared to take a few breaths and walk away. Take some quiet time away; sit in the toilet or bathroom for a few moments or go for a short walk. However, make sure you let someone know so that the search party isn't sent after you!
- Remember it's not your responsibility to make everyone happy. If you have tried to take as much into account as possible then you have done your best. You cannot fix it for everyone.
- Appreciate that everyone is under stress to a certain degree. For example, one relative may have worked overtime to get everything done before their office closed for Christmas and may be feeling exhausted and harried. Another may be anxious because they overspent on their credit cards. As far as possible, be understanding of other people's situations.
- Consider discussing options for Christmas ahead of time with all relevant parties and try to reach an agreement on what is important.
- Negotiate on contributions to the food by all no matter who is hosting the big day for the year.
- Be prepared to negotiate and alternate who hosts Christmas
- Consider booking Christmas lunch or dinner at a restaurant for all parties. This has the advantages of minimising stress and pressure and if families find it hard to spend a long time together this will also naturally limit the amount of time spent in each other's company.
- Consider having a more simple buffet lunch or dinner with everyone bringing something. This is particularly relevant in the heat of Australia when cooking and having a hot meal is less suitable to our climate for lunch.
- If you have a particularly difficult family member consider minimising your contact or split your Christmas functions so that you spend less time together.
- Planning activities like a game of cricket can give people less time to sit around and brood on old issues and provides a positive outlet for anxieties and agitations.
- Calm it down a little. Sometimes things can move so fast during the holidays. Everyone wants to catch up with you, little jobs like peeling vegetables keep arising, the little ones want to play with you and everywhere you turn there are people. Find some time for yourself every day. Get yourself into a quiet room and have some time to relax. Deep breathing, stretching or even meditation, are good ways to recharge your tolerance. Read a book/magazine or listen to music. Going for a walk or doing some exercise can also get you away for a bit and allow you some space.
- Pick who you talk to. Just because they are around does not mean you have to socialise with all your friends and family. If you don't feel like talking to some people, just try and keep your distance. Do things with the people you feel most comfortable around. Going for a long walk with a favourite relative will help you to get away and spend time with the person you would most like to. Just make sure you let everyone else know where you are going.
- If you feel overwhelmed, let people know. You don't have to be involved in everything that's going on. You need to pace yourself and choose the things you would like to do. Just politely say, "no thank you". You have the right to say no sometimes.
- If you are isolated or alone at Christmas consider getting involved in your community. Attend community events like carol's by Candlelight and consider volunteering with an agency so that you can have contact with people.

- Get stuck in sometimes. Although you need to look after yourself first, there may be times when you just need to get involved with the preparations and interaction. Maybe you could be the games master and pull everyone onto the twister mat, or organise other party games to get everyone moving.

For more tips specifically related to coping with Christmas in separated families, bereaved families, a lonely Christmas or step families visit the following link:

http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Christmas_can_be_stressful?open

Financial Stressors

Christmas can also be a costly time financially .Although it is the thought that counts, many people end up with gifts they don't want or can't use which is a waste of resources. Again the key to resolving these potential difficulties is discussion between parties.

- Consider discussing a limit of how much to spend on gifts
- Consider having a secret santa- put everyone's name in jar and pull out one at a time allocating one person to buy the gift for that person. Continue till everyone has someone they are buying for. This ensures everyone has a gift but minimises cost. You may also want to agree on a cost limit for that one present you will buy.
- Consider only buying gifts for the children at the family get together
- Make a list of who you are buying for and Budget for Christmas so that you don't overspend.
- Do your Christmas shopping early, perhaps mid year at sale time or in November.
- Shop online or use mail order catalogues to avoid the crowds at shopping centres.
- If finances are very tight but you have plenty of time- make up your own vouchers and give them to family members for Christmas. They might involve giving someone a massage, offering to come over and cook a meal, or mowing the lawn.

Helping Children Cope

Children can be very excited by Christmas but can also find the change in routines stressful. You can help your children beat the holiday stress beast by following these tips:

- Limit television and video games — It's very easy at this time of the year to allow the television and video games to become the baby sitter. But children who are stressed need some type of physical activity or exercise.
- Remember routines — For parents of small children, this is especially good advice. During the holidays children will find their routines disrupted. They are often dragged along on shopping expeditions or taken to events over which they have no control. And when a routine is broken, stress can result.
- Nutrition — Ever notice the lines at the fast food restaurants as it gets closer to the holidays? They are getting longer because parents may be too busy to go home and cook a nutritious meal. And factor in all of those sugary holiday treats, and you end up with a stressed out, hungry family. Plan at least one healthy meal as a family everyday. And don't forget to toss in a healthy snack while you're visiting the mall.
- Family traditions — Many people fail to underestimate how important traditions are to themselves and their children. Family traditions offer great comfort and security for children when everything in their lives is being disrupted by the holiday season. Perhaps your family would enjoy creating an Advent calendar together, or baking cookies and delivering them to a local nursing home or soup kitchen.
- Attitude check — Both children *and* their parents need to have an attitude check before the holiday season begins. Take a deep breath, and have everyone in the family pledge

to make the holiday season a time of joy and peace. Remind everyone that with the right attitude, that goal can be met.

- Rest and relaxation — Everyone, especially children, needs to take a "time out" over the holiday season to rest and relax. For parents of younger children this is especially good advice, because a well-rested child will be much happier on a trip to the mall than one who is in desperate need of a nap. Schedule some R & R time for everyone in the family.
- Laugh — Laughter is still the best way to beat stress and change everyone's mood from bad to good. Take time to read the comics to your children, or find a holiday joke book with family humour at your bookstore or library.

Food and Alcohol

Overindulging in the food department can also become an issue for people over the Christmas season and sabotage goals people have set about their weight and health. Here are some tips to help manage all the sweet treats, alcohol and abundance of food:

- If you are hosting the function try to minimise the number of snack foods you have available all day long
- If you are a guest consider having a plate and only eat off the plate rather than pick at things directly from the bowls. This will help you keep track of how much you are consuming.
- Have a good breakfast before you go so that you are less likely to be hungry and pick at all the sweet or fatty treats
- When it comes to the meal choose lean meat, salad and vegies first. Try to limit the fatty gravies, potatoes and bread.
- Try to get everyone involved in some physical games or activity

- Drink lots of water - don't forget to rehydrate. By topping up with clean fresh water your body is also more likely to pass unwanted toxins
- Try alternating an alcohol beverage with a glass of water, this will probably halve your alcohol intake and minimise dehydration and possible headaches. Your liver will probably thank you too
- Decide before the event how many alcoholic drinks that you feel is appropriate for you to consume and only drink those
- If you're worried about nibbling while you're cooking, cut up some fresh vegetables like carrot, celery, beans and snowpeas for yourself before you begin. Reach for a carrot stick instead of tasting foods or snacking while you're cooking.
- Remove the skin from turkey or chicken before serving, as over one third of the fat is in the skin.
- Use a non-stick cooking spray to grease the pan when cooking or baking, instead of oil or butter.
- Instead of using the fatty drippings for basting, try using fat-free ingredients such as wine or stock.
- Skim off the fat from meat drippings before making gravy.
- Use equal amounts of applesauce or prune puree to replace oil in cakes.
- Use Xylitol for sweetening things rather than sugar (plant based healthy natural sweetener that is a third of the calories of sugar and is low Glycaemic, available at health food stores)
- Use equal amounts of plain, low-fat yogurt to replace sour cream
- Season vegetables with lemon juice, balsamic vinegar or herbs and spices rather than cream.

- If making cream soups or white sauces, use non-fat milk or non-fat evaporated milk instead of whole milk or cream.
- Use salad dressings sparingly. You could try using balsamic vinegar and olive oil variety instead.
- Consider having fruit and vegetables sliced up as alternatives to all the highly processed sweet and fat foods available for Christmas treats.
- Instead of Christmas pudding consider fruit salad, but if you want a Christmas pudding you probably don't need to have the fruit mince tarts and fruit cake available as well.
- Cranberry sauce, applesauce, and chutney are great low-fat alternatives to gravy.
- Organise quick and easy alternatives This is undoubtedly the busiest time of the year for all of us and it is easy to fall into the trap of grabbing takeaway food from the shop on the way home. By organising a couple of quick, healthy alternatives and having ingredients ready at hand will save your waistline and your pocket.
- Never go to a party hungry .So many parties, so much food! Eating before you go to a party ensures that you can snack at the party and not gorge.
- Eat smaller portions-If you have a day planned with a couple of different gatherings of friends, or you have a big dinner planned, don't get the guilts and go without. Simply eat smaller, healthier portions during the day.

For more Coping with Christmas stress tips go to

http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Christmas_tips_to_reduce_the_stress?OpenDocument

Terri Sheldon and Dr Peta Stapleton are two well known Australian psychologists with 35 years of combined clinical experience. They have developed the Slim-Minds Program that teaches the latest effective psychological techniques to break out of that YoYo failure cycle that so often occurs with traditional weight loss programs.

See www.slimminds.com