

NATIONAL STRESS-FREE FAMILY HOLIDAY MONTH

Great Expectations

The holiday season is a special time for enjoying our family and friends and celebrating traditions. However, it can also be a time for unrelenting stress.

A common mistake made by many is trying to recreate the perfect Norman Rockwell holiday. The house is beautifully decorated with outdoor lights and an exquisitely trimmed Christmas tree; numerous presents, all carefully chosen and meticulously wrapped are displayed under the tree; the holiday meal, fit for a king, includes all the old-time favorites; and everyone is in a festive mood. Picture perfect, maybe, but is it realistic? Is this scene applicable or even relevant to your family today? If you and your family create stress by trying to meet unrealistic expectations, make a firm commitment to do things differently this year.

The trick is to identify those things that are important to your family and develop holiday traditions that are uniquely your own. A tradition is simply a family ritual that celebrates the family and sets it apart. A holiday tradition for your family might simply be the time and way you open Christmas or Hanukkah presents, or preparing Grandma Tate's sweet potato casserole, or attending religious services or community programs together. Hold a family meeting to discuss the traditions in your family. Pace yourself, and involve every family member in the holiday preparations. And don't expect perfection!

Simplify Please

1. If sending Christmas cards is a priority, make it a family project. Write a Christmas letter requiring contributions from every family member. Have the grown-ups address the envelopes and the kids put on the stamps.
2. If you enjoy getting all the extended family together for a holiday meal, ask everyone to bring a dish. Also, consider purchasing all or part of your holiday meal from your favorite restaurant or cafeteria. Engage all family members in the clean-up duties.
3. If holiday treats are a priority, farm out the preparation. Fill pretty holiday tins with goodies from your favorite bakery.
4. Start early with holiday decorating. Consider putting the Christmas tree up right after Thanksgiving. You won't be so rushed and can enjoy it longer.
5. Make a gift list and utilize catalogs and the phone. Hire older kids to wrap your presents. Consider gifts that don't require shopping, such as magazine subscriptions or tickets to sporting events.
6. Open some gifts on Christmas Eve to keep the children from becoming overwhelmed on Christmas morning. If possible, exchange gifts with extended family either before or after Christmas Day.
7. Celebrate the true meaning of the season!

Priorities

With the current trend toward slick commercialism it is easy for children to be lured into **GETTING** rather than **GIVING**. You can help by taking time **BEFORE** the holiday to discuss realistic expectations about gifts. Save catalogs sent from local stores and have children cut out or circle the items they want. After specifying the number of gifts they may have, allow them to choose from their list. Help your children shift their focus outward by encouraging them to choose a gift to be donated to charity. Or make crafts or gift baskets to be delivered to a nursing home. Older children can volunteer to baby sit or help an elderly neighbor.

Stress Busters

...for Mom & Dad

Recognize the signs of stress. These include ineffective coping, such as becoming depressed, irritable, anxious or inability to concentrate. Stress related illnesses include headaches, high blood pressure, neck and back pain and stomach aches. Eliminate the threat of stress by putting yourself in control, rather than letting things just happen.

Keep family expectations realistic. Don't allow your family's holiday expectations to be determined by extended family, friends, or the media. Instead, focus on your family's strengths and be realistic about what works for your family as a whole.

Give yourself permission to say, "No." Be realistic about what you can and cannot accomplish. Say "I'm sorry, but this won't work for me right now."

Watch your diet. Eat lightly, more often, and include complex carbohydrates for energy. A diet high in carbohydrates increases the body's supply of serotonin, a brain chemical known for its calming effect. Additionally, drink plenty of water and avoid overloading on the sweets, and snacks filled with empty calories. Also, cut back on stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine.

Exercise. Exercise can rid the body of excess tension, help promote relaxation, improve cardiovascular function, and increase energy and stamina.

...for Children

Recognize the signs of stress. These include crankiness, irritability and a change in appetite or sleep habits.

Provide structure. Kids thrive on routines, predictability. Therefore, structure is important for children especially during the holidays. Also, make sure kids get their sleep and take a nap or have a "quiet time" each day.

Set Clear Guidelines. Gently remind children of your expectations before going to grandma's or the mall. Then, remember to praise, appreciate, encourage and acknowledge the good behavior.

Give attention freely. Love is spelled TIME. Laugh, cuddle and play with your kids. Let them choose their favorite games, activities or book to share with you and have fun.

Encourage physical exercise. Exercise releases tension for children as well as burns excess energy! Plan daily for a minimum of 30 minutes of outside activities and play.

Watch your children's diet. Limit foods that may affect behavior, such as refined sweets, caffeine (found in chocolate and soft drinks), artificial preservatives and chemical coloring. Keep plenty of fresh fruit and raw veggies on hand for snacking.