



EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

MOVING LIVES FORWARD

HOLIDAY STRESSORS

According to a recent Stress in American survey, adults are more likely to find family responsibilities more stressful than they have in the past (www.apa.org). For many families, the holiday season is a time of celebration and joy, but this time of year also brings along additional feelings of stress. Preparing for the holidays and changes in schedules and routines can seem exhausting, overwhelming and the joys of the holidays can feel completely lost. Financial burdens and having time off from school for children can really increase the stress and anxiety parents may feel during this time. Unfortunately, adults may turn to unhealthy stress management behaviors such as overindulging in eating or drinking to keep going. These actions don't help and often make us feel worse.

Fortunately, there are better, healthier and longer-lasting techniques we can use to make holiday stress – and other stressful times – more manageable. The American Psychological Association, or APA, suggests these tips to help parents effectively manage holiday stress:

1. STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTIONS – We know that strong, supportive relationships help us manage all kinds of challenges. So, we can view the holidays as a time to reconnect with the positive people in our lives. Accepting help and support from those who care about us can help alleviate stress. Also, volunteering at a local charity on our own or with family can be another way to make connections; helping others often makes us feel better, too.

2. INITIATE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE SEASON – It can be helpful to have conversations with our kids about the variety of different holiday traditions our families, friends and others may celebrate. Parents can use this time as an opportunity to discuss how some families may not participate in the same holiday traditions as others. Not everyone needs to be the same. It is important to teach open-mindedness about others and their celebrations.

3. SET EXPECTATIONS – It is helpful to set realistic expectations for gifts and holiday activities. Depending on a child's age, we can use this opportunity to teach kids about the value of money and responsible spending. We need to remember to pare down our own expectations, too. Instead of trying to take on everything, we need to identify the most important holiday tasks and take small concrete steps to accomplish them.

4. KEEP THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE – On the whole, the holiday season is short. It helps to maintain a broader context and a longer-term perspective. We can ask ourselves, what's the worst thing that could happen this holiday? Our greatest fears may not happen and, if they do, we can tap our strengths and the help of others to manage them. There will be time after the holiday season to follow up or do more of things we've overlooked or did not have the time to do during the holidays.

5. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF – It is important that we pay attention to our own needs and feelings during the holiday season. We can find fun, enjoyable and relaxing activities for ourselves and our families. By keeping our minds and bodies healthy, we are primed to deal with stressful situations when they arise. Consider cutting back television viewing for kids and getting the family out together for fresh air and a winter walk. Physical activity can help us feel better and sleep well, while reducing sedentary time and possible exposure to stress-inducing advertisements.

If feelings of depression, anxiety or sadness persistent throughout this time, it may be beneficial to speak with a mental health professional. This can allow for you to have one-on-one support and work through the feelings you are experiencing. Keeping yourself healthy helps you to feel more confident as a parent, and to have more positive interactions with your friends and loved ones.

Source: APA (November 2016). Tips for parents on managing holiday stress. American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/parents-holiday.aspx> (11 October 2018)

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