

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blue winter jacket with a fur-lined hood, smiling warmly as she hugs a baby. The baby is wearing a blue and white patterned knit hat with a pom-pom and a dark blue winter jacket. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of trees and foliage in warm, golden-brown tones, suggesting an autumn or winter setting.

**Tips for
being
present,
not perfect
this
holiday
season**

BY NEFERTITI B. POYNER, ED.D., JOSCELYN PAINE

The holidays are a time of celebration, filled with family gatherings, gift giving and good cheer, but for many people, they also are a time of stress and seemingly never-ending to-do lists.

According to a survey by the American Psychological Association, 38 percent of people said their stress level increases during the holidays.

To help ward off the stress of the season, Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC) Early Childhood Specialist and National Trainer Nefertiti B. Poyner, Ed.D., offers tips for families to slow down and focus on being present, not perfect.

Tip #1: Avoid comparing yourself to others

The holidays often come with the added pressure of being a model host, displaying Pinterest-worthy decorations and purchasing extravagant gifts. Instead of comparing yourself to others – or what you may see on TV or social media – measure yourself against your own progress.

“The only person you should be trying to be is the person you see in the mirror every day,” said Poyner. “Instead of setting unrealistic expectations for yourself, aim for concrete, achievable goals that are unique and specific to you...”

If you know you cannot cook a turkey, volunteer to whip up a scrumptious side dish for your family's feast. If you do not have the time, energy or funds to make your house look like the set of a holiday movie, put up just a few of your favorite decorations. Know your strengths and build upon them to nurture your own resilience."

Tip #2: Emphasize presence over presents

People – not presents – are what make the holiday season special. Do not underestimate the importance of forming simple, yet meaningful connections with those around you, over more tangible items, such as gifts.

"The holidays are all about being with the ones you love," Poyner explained. "You do not need to have a basketball team-sized group of friends – it is the quality of our relationships that matter, not the quantity. Laughing and spending time with those we care about gives us peace of mind. These connections are more valuable than any present we will ever receive."

Tip #3: Recognize your mental health needs

For those coping with grief, loss or mental health challenges, the holidays may not feel like the most wonderful time of the year. Sometimes, in order to be fully present, we need to know when to take a break from the holiday hustle and bustle.

"There is strength in being able to admit when you are struggling," Poyner noted. "If you need to bow out early or skip a dinner party altogether because you are feeling sad or overwhelmed – it is OK. Tweak your traditions to make them work in your favor. Whether that means having someone else host an event or limiting the number of holiday happenings you attend – do what you can with the energy you possess."

Tip #4: Ask for help

A little help can go a long way – especially during the holidays. If you need assistance tackling your to-do list – do not hesitate to ask a family member or friend to lend a helping hand.

"We all need a little help sometimes," Poyner shared. "Even when we try not to be overambitious, we may still find ourselves with too much to do and too little time. Need assistance decking the halls? Involve your children in the decorating process – they can even help craft their own holiday creations. Want to try a new recipe? Ask a family member or friend for cooking tips. On the same token, if you notice someone else struggling – be there to offer your support."

Tip #5: Practice self-compassion

We are often our own worst critics. This holiday season, make sure to change any negatives – when speaking about yourself – by embracing self-compassion.

"Talk to yourself as you would your best friend. Ultimately, we should all strive to be our own best friend," Poyner said. "If the turkey gets burned, say, 'It's OK. I can get takeout.' If you have a negative thought, acknowledge that you are being hard on yourself, and do your best to regroup. Be kinder and more patient with yourself – words matter."