

## ARTICLES ON HOLIDAY STRESS AND CHILDREN

### #1

### 10 Tips for Helping Your Child Cope with Holiday Stress

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By [David Fassler, M.D.](#)

For most children, the holidays are happy, fun and exciting times. There's a break from school and a chance to see friends and relatives. There may also be special food, music and family traditions. However, for some children, the holidays can also be stressful and confusing. Family plans and celebrations may be complicated by divorce, separation or remarriage. The holidays can also be a difficult time for children who have lost a parent, sibling or close relative. This year, many children are also separated from parents due to ongoing military service.

The holidays often remind children of what's changed and what's now different. For example, a child from a divorced family may feel sad on some level because he misses the "intact" family he used to have. A child whose parent is on active military duty may feel it's particularly unfair that her daddy or mommy needs to be away over the holidays. There are a number of things parents can do to help children cope with holiday stress. These include:

1. Discuss holiday plans well in advance, and let kids participate in decisions to the extent possible. Kids need some degree of predictability. Prolonged uncertainty, constantly changing plans or last-minute decisions can all increase stress.
  - If you're traveling, leave plenty of extra time and bring child-friendly snacks, books, games and/or music.
  - Don't overschedule. You may not be able to do everything or see everyone. Kids can easily get "burned out," overtired and cranky during the holidays.
  - Give kids some "downtime." Don't expect them to be "on" all the time. Leave room for some quiet activities, like listening to music, walking in the woods or reading a book.
  - Make sure kids get plenty of sleep. While it may be exciting to stay up late, lack of sleep often leads to increased irritability.
  - Let kids be honest about their feelings. Don't force them to act happy and excited if they're feeling quiet or down.
  - Don't promise things you can't produce. For example, don't promise that a parent will be home in time for the holidays if the decision is really out of your control. Don't promise that someone will call if they're in an area with limited phone service.
  - Uphold and maintain family traditions even if a parent is absent. Kids count on certain traditions, which can have an important grounding effect by letting kids know that even though some things have changed, other things have remained the same.
  - Don't try and compensate for an absent parent with extra gifts or toys. It won't work. What most kids really want is time, attention and reassurance.
  - Take care of yourself. Try and avoid getting overloaded with obligations. If you feel stressed, it increases the pressure and tension on your children.

Most kids, even those dealing with loss or family transitions, can and do enjoy the holidays. However, preparation, patience and honesty can help prevent conflict, reduce stress and enhance the holiday season for the whole family.

*Dr. Fassler is a board-certified child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in Burlington, Vt. He is a clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Vermont College of Medicine, and the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for the Vermont Center for Children, Youth and Families.*

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## #2 Children and Holiday Stress

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Families want their holidays to be happy for everyone, especially the children. Many parents do not realize that the holiday season can be a time of hustle, bustle and a never-ending whirlwind of stress for their children.

It is important to remember that children (and parents) need to find time to relax and enjoy a wonderful time of the year. How can children relax when they see their parents running around frantically shopping, baking, decorating and becoming stressed at the thought of blowing the holiday budget after one trip to the mall?



**These tips may help both parents and children recognize holiday anxiety and feel less stress.**

**Signs of a child's holiday stress may include:**

- Tears for seemingly minor reasons
- Nervous behaviors such as nail biting and hair twirling
- Physical complaints including headaches and stomach aches
- Regression to younger behaviors: bedwetting, temper tantrums
- Withdrawal from school, friends and family
- A change in your child's regular behavior

**Here are some ways to reduce stress for the entire family:**

- **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 trips or taken to special events. They stay up past bedtime and eat too many holiday goodies. When a routine is broken, stress can result.
- **Say "No"** - You don't have to accept every invitation to cookie swaps, parties and gift exchanges that you receive.

- **Nutrition** - Have you ever noticed the lines at fast food restaurants as the holidays approach? The lines are getting longer because people are often too busy to go home and cook a nutritious meal. Add all of those sugary holiday treats, and you end up with a stressed out, hungry family. Plan at least one healthy meal for the family every day. Take the time to talk and enjoy being together as a family.
- **Family traditions** - Many don't realize how important traditions are to themselves and their children. Family traditions offer great comfort and security for children. What are your family traditions? Perhaps your family would enjoy creating a holiday calendar or baking cookies together.
- **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. The less holiday stress you feel, the more relaxed your children will be.
- **Rest and relaxation** - Everyone, especially a child, needs to take a "time out" over the holiday season to rest and relax. A well-rested child will be much happier on a trip to the mall than one who is in need of a nap. Schedule some rest and relaxation time for everyone in the family.
- **Favorite things** - If you are traveling for the holidays, bring your child's favorite blanket or stuffed animal. A bit of home will help your child feel more comfortable.
- **Laugh** - Laughter is still the best way to beat stress and change everyone's mood from bad to good. Lighten the mood with funny movies, sledding or cozy chats over cups of hot chocolate (don't forget the marshmallows).

Make a stress-free holiday your new family tradition! Fond memories of the holidays are a beautiful gift you can leave with your children. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, the holidays may be one of the few times when you can offer a present that only you can give — priceless memories of a holiday filled with fun, love and laughter for the entire family.

**For more behavioral health information, call:**

**Anne Arundel County Department of Health**

**Adolescent and Family Services**

**410-222-6785**

**or visit these websites:**

[Anne Arundel County Network of Care](http://www.aahealth.org/programs/behav-hlth/adolescent/child-holiday-stress)

SOURCE: <http://www.aahealth.org/programs/behav-hlth/adolescent/child-holiday-stress>

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## **#3      MANAGING HOLIDAY STRESS**

In Great Britain the word "holiday" has the same meaning as vacation. Many Americans would find this comparison laughable. For most of us, the holidays come with our own "to-do" lists.

Too often we take holiday stress for granted. What's worse, we often have higher expectations for this season than for any other time of the year. Planning for the holidays can leave us feeling impatient, cranky, and — in some cases — depressed. When the realities of day-to-day life conflict with our efforts to make the holiday season perfect, stress results.

## How do I prevent holiday stress?

Are your expectations for the holidays realistic? Asking yourself this question is the first step to managing holiday stress. Make a list of what you expect from yourself and your family during the holidays. Hidden within these expectations you might find your potential holiday stressors — the things specific to you that can cause stress.

Under each item in the list, write down what changes you can make to prevent or defuse stress. Make the changes that will be most helpful to you. Do not hold on to unrealistic goals, such as creating the most enchanting holiday atmosphere. Remember to include your own needs.

Here is an *example* of a holiday stress prevention list:

### Holiday shopping

- Ask people what they want instead of scouring the earth to find the "perfect" gifts.
- Shop early, when there is more of a selection.
- Stick to your gift budget.

### Planning family get-togethers

- Buy prepared foods, instead of cooking everything from scratch.
- Ask others to bring their favorite dishes.
- Cook and freeze foods ahead of time.

### Scheduling time with family and friends

- Simplify holiday commitments and traditions. Discuss with your family which traditions are most important to you and to them. It's okay to re-evaluate past traditions.
- Allow time for yourself. Remember to do things that *you* enjoy.
- Avoid time crunches by making plans to visit some friends and family soon after the holidays.
- Don't over-schedule yourself. Allow enough time to relax and recover after visiting with others.
- Tell family members about your commitments so you are not struggling against their expectations.
- Travel after rush hour. When driving long distances, give yourself time to stop and rest.

### Pausing before the holiday spread

- Avoid overeating and overdrinking, especially alcoholic beverages.
- Avoid starving yourself in anticipation of eating at holiday parties. This approach can lead to eating too much of the wrong foods.

- Continue to exercise and watch your diet.

### Managing your time

- Set priorities and let go of impossible goals.
- Stop to enjoy the fruits of your labor.
- Don't spend all of your time planning activities for your family. You might end up feeling drained and unappreciated.
- Take the time you need to finish tasks that are important to you. Don't try to complete everything at once.
- Ask others, including the kids, to help you complete chores.
- Rest when your body tells you to.

### What are the holiday blues?

For some of us, the holidays can be a depressing time when we get the holiday blues. Feelings of sadness, loneliness, and anger can intensify when contrasted with the joy expected of the holidays. Factors that *can contribute* to holiday depression include:

- Associating the holidays with unresolved family issues or a painful childhood
- Ignoring feelings of sadness, loneliness, or depression in an effort to maintain "holiday cheer"
- Facing the loss of a loved one with whom you have shared the holidays
- Having unrealistic expectations of family and friends
- Having an expectation that you "should" feel good
- Being away from family and friends
- Feeling isolated from others
- Reflecting on losses or disappointments over the past year
- Coping with changes in family obligations, particularly after a recent marriage or divorce
- Drinking more alcohol, which is often more readily available during the holidays (Avoid drinking alcohol to ward off negative feelings. Alcohol often will make depression worse.)

### How do I cope with the holiday blues?

- Try something new. Take a vacation with a family member or friend.
- Spend time with people who care about you.
- Volunteer your time to help others. Spending time with those in need can help you feel less isolated.
- If you are religious, take time to reflect on the spiritual significance of the holidays.
- Try to appreciate the good things you have now instead of focusing on the past.
- Stay active. Get out. Go for a walk. Window shop.
- Accept feelings of sadness or loneliness. These feelings might not go away just because it's the holidays.
- Get help if you need it. Don't be embarrassed to ask for help any time of the year.

### References

- American Heart Association. Holiday Stress? [Try Our Top 5 Tips for a Heart-Healthy Holiday Season](#) Accessed 3/30/2016.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Managing Stress](#) Accessed 3/30/2016.

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[http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/healthy\\_living/hic\\_Stress\\_Management\\_and\\_Emotional\\_Health/hic\\_Managing\\_Holiday\\_Stress](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/healthy_living/hic_Stress_Management_and_Emotional_Health/hic_Managing_Holiday_Stress)