

‘TIS THE SEASON TO BE JOLLY! OR IS IT?

Christmas is a time of the year that many people look forward to. It's supposed to be a magical time when everybody is joyful. It's when dreams and fantasies can come true. However, for many people Christmas feels more like a nightmare than a pleasant dream. For others their reaction is 'wake me up when it's over'. The truth is that for many people Christmas is actually a time of stress, and even sadness. Sometimes it feels like the most stressful time of the year! What can we do about it? It helps to start by understanding what makes Christmas a stressful time for you.

“It's the happiest time of the year” - or is it?

A major reason for Christmas stress is the *unrealistic expectations* that we carry to the season. As adults, we often expect to have the same wonderful time we did as carefree children. However, instead of waiting for Santa, we have now become Santa with all the responsibilities attached! Grown up Christmases will not usually match those of our childhood. *What we need to do is let go of our expectations for a perfectly jolly, absolutely wonderful time the whole season through* and give ourselves permission to enjoy the parts we like and accept that there will be parts we do not like.

We also need to understand that there will be the temptation to get caught up in activities that will create stress for us and can lead to guilt feelings. We will be tempted to overspend, overeat, consume too much alcohol and get too little sleep. For some people there are major stressors – for example, spending the first Christmas without a particular loved one, or finding out that you have or your partner has just been made redundant. Understanding the nature of our particular stress and that of those who are close to us can help us to cope better. Let's look first at dealing with the ordinary stresses of Christmas.

All I want for Christmas

We wish that most folks around us only wanted their two front teeth! Instead we get the impression that everyone we are close to is expecting us to buy them something fancy

and expensive. Most of us get caught up in shopping sprees at this time of the year - whether buying gifts or getting new things for the house. We end up spending much more than we plan to. We fall into the trap of “trying to keep up with the Joneses” (whoever they are). This is true especially when we have children, as we can easily get guilty (usually unnecessarily so) about not getting certain things for them.

We can reduce our stress significantly by making a Christmas budget and sticking to it. Make a shopping list and avoid the temptation to pick up other items. Remember that simple gifts (especially ones you make yourself) are often more appreciated than the expensive store-bought items. Our children really do not need all the new toys they want or their friends have – a few things they will really use are better than heaps of things discarded in a few days. Spend wisely so that you will have money left to take you through the long month of January.

“I’ll be home for Christmas”

Going home for Christmas or having family come to us is something most of us look forward to. However, time together in many families can be stressful. Small children are excited and not on their best behaviour. The long drive to the country can be exhausting – not to mention the decision about whose parents we spend this Christmas with.

Forward planning really helps here. Maybe it is best to go to the country on Christmas morning, not in the crazy Christmas Eve traffic. Getting the children to bed early on Christmas Eve may help them to cope better with Christmas Day activities.

It also helps to be realistic about family relationships. Remember that you cannot change others. Miserable family members are unlikely to be nice just because it is Christmas. Unresolved family conflicts will not be suddenly smoothed out. However, we do have it in our power to choose how we respond to people and situations. Make a plan!

“I’ll have a blue Christmas without you”

For several people, Christmas is particularly difficult because of the loss of a loved one - whether because of death or a broken relationship. For those who are going through this (especially for the first time) *it is important to give yourselves permission to grieve, to talk about the absent person but also to accept that you might still find enjoyment in the season.* You may feel like not celebrating at all. *Because people have different needs it is important to remember that each will cope in his/her own unique way.* We should not force others to do things they are not ready to, but we should be open to sharing our feelings with one another.

“Jesus is the reason for the Season”

One of the most helpful things is to remind ourselves of why we celebrate Christmas. It is about God sending His Son into the world with the good news of salvation and peace. For those who are not Christians, the season is often still meaningful because of the emphasis on sharing, giving or being with loved ones. Focusing on these matters can help us to get our priorities straight during this season and provide a sense of hope, love and joy – making our Christmas not just “blue” but a rainbow-coloured one. As Lisa Englehardt says, “Christmas with all its internal and external pressures, can make our hearts feel like stone: dull, heavy, lifeless. Yet the miracle of incarnation can transform us... For if we can open our earthbound heart, then God’s own life and love will come to dwell within it.”

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