

Unwrapping Holiday Stress

by Mike Verano

Stress is as much a part of holiday tradition as greeting cards, presents and awkward family moments. The honest truth is that while the holidays should be a time of peace on Earth and good will towards all, they are equally the time for discord and ill-will. So pervasive is this truth that, according to the American Psychological Association, one in five Americans worries that holiday stress will cause them at least one physical health problem. How is it that a potentially festive time turns into a carnival of tension and worry? Why are high blood pressure and tension headaches as commonplace as eggnog and fruitcake?

The holidays do not bring us stress; we bring stress to the holidays. If we look closely at our inner tension, we will find that it was neatly packed, wrapped and hand delivered by none other than ourselves. This is good news, though. It opens up the possibility that we can ask for, and receive, the gift of inner peace this season.

Most plans for reducing stress have four basic components: eat right, exercise, get plenty of sleep, and enjoy the company of others. If you are like me, you look at this list and feel even more stressed out than before. The reason, of course, is that this list represents things that can be challenging to do long before the holiday season rolls around. The likelihood that these activities will automatically become our standard mode of operation from November through January is about the same as that of Santa bringing us the high-definition plasma TV we have been longing for, rather than the lawn tool that will occupy our every weekend.

Don't be dismayed, merry gentlemen and women: there is another way to approach the holiday season. The way out of this trap is not to wrestle with that Grinch called stress—it is to let go of our habitual tendency to resist the world as it is. When we hold on desperately to the visions that dance in our head, we become frustrated when the world refuses to dance along. However, when we let go of the need for the holiday season (or any season, for that matter) to conform to our preconceived notions, we discover a true miracle; life isn't so bad when we let go of control and move into a state of acceptance. This does not mean that we simply lie down and allow the yuletide sleigh to run us over. Moving into a state of "let-go" does not mean we fall victim to the wintry winds of fate. When we stop struggling against life, we discover new options and energies.

Imagine the joy of creating a peaceful path for yourself as your mindfully move through the crowds of holiday shoppers. See what happens when you relax into the joy of giving *and* receiving. Imagine the good cheer you will create when you are fully present at family functions, no matter how dysfunctional your family.

Finally, in the spirit of the season, see what happens when you give yourself the gift of a silent mind—one that does not continually judge every experience. When your holiday mug runneth over with stress, empty it by asking yourself, "What am I resisting at this very moment?" Hit the pause button on the running mental commentary and you may find that all *is* calm, all *is* quiet.

Here are some strategies to unwrap yourself from the 4 Fs of holiday stress.

Food

You've tried this:

Limiting yourself to eating only holiday foods that begin with the letter 'Q.'

Now try this:

When you do eat seasonal snacks and meals, do so mindfully; eat with your full attention on the food and the experience of eating. You will find that you actually eat less but enjoy more.

Finances

You've tried this:

Putting your holiday cheer on credit and then making a New Year's resolution to get out of debt.

Now try this:

Give yourself credit for your ability to create holiday magic without breaking the bank.

Family

You've tried this:

Thinking that the holidays would make everyone get along.

Now try this:

Drop the expectations of familial harmony and realize that the only family member you can change is yourself.

Fun

You've tried this:

Overindulging in the holiday spirit, confusing excitement for real happiness.

Now try this:

Experience the true joy of being in the present moment and realize that the most fun of all comes from anything that opens your heart.

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