

## That Holiday Season Pressure

It's Christmas! Time off work. Gifts to give and receive. Eating and drinking as much as you like. Seeing friends, family, loved ones. The atmosphere of good will and cheer. What's not to like?

Quite a lot, actually. Christmas is often a source of great stress for many. At least one study suggests that it can literally give you a heart attack. Obviously, many people have good reason to not like Christmas, be it estrangement or loss of their own family or friends, trauma experienced during the festive period (with all the context cues constantly bringing the unpleasant memories flooding back) and so on. But, if you look at the modern manifestation of Christmas, it turns out there are a surprising number of elements that can, and probably do, lead to an increase in stress, rather than the opposite.



### Financial and time pressures at Christmas

The expense of gifts and food, the pressure of shopping and the expectations of the season can make Christmas an extremely stressful time. General suggestions include:

- Budget for Christmas so that you don't overspend. This may mean putting money away each week throughout the year and sticking to your shopping list.
- Do your Christmas shopping early, perhaps in November. Some people like to do their Christmas shopping gradually over the course of the year, starting with the post-Christmas sales.
- Shop online or use mail order catalogues to avoid the crowds at shopping centres.
- Consider a simpler version of Christmas lunch this year (such as a buffet where everyone brings a plate or delegate as many tasks as you can).
- Seek advice from a financial counsellor if you are experiencing severe money troubles.
- Remember, you don't have to spend money to give someone a present – you can give of your time and expertise as well. If you are strapped for cash, you could give someone a babysitting voucher where you offer to babysit for an evening, or offer to help out with a task that needs doing around the house or in the garden. Tutor someone for an hour, proofread an important letter or job application, walk their dog – whatever suits your skill set and the time you have available.
- Pass on a book you enjoyed. It may not be new from the shop, but it comes with love and your recommendation, and it shows you have thought about the person you have given it to.

## Family tensions at Christmas

All families experience tension to some degree. Part of the reason why Christmas time can be so stressful is the unrealistic expectation of coming together as a happy family on this one day of the year. Suggestions include:



- Keep realistic expectations. If your relatives tend to fight throughout the year, they will most likely fight on Christmas Day as well.
- Appreciate that everyone is under stress to a certain degree. For example, one relative may have worked overtime to get everything done before their office closed for Christmas, and may be feeling exhausted and harried. Another may be anxious because they overspent on their credit cards. Be as understanding as you can of people's situations.
- Consider breaking up the celebrations to keep 'warring factions' apart. For example, you could see one group of relatives on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas Day.
- Family members involved in after-lunch activities (such as cricket on the back lawn) are less likely to get into arguments. Plan for something to do as a group after lunch if necessary.
- Use relaxation techniques, distraction and group activities to help steer around stressful situations.
- Avoid indulging in alcohol – the reduced inhibitions could contribute to (or cause) an unnecessary argument
- **Take the time now, to decide what is important to you and why?** Don't let anyone else swamp you with their ideas. Decide for yourself what is most important about Christmas. Is it the social side of Christmas, or the spiritual side? Is it the family part or the material things? Is it all about business or is it about doing good things. Decide for yourself what is most important and you will be on the right track to taking over your own Christmas.
- **Let your decision determine how you spend your Christmas.** This year, be active in deciding how you will spend your time. I will be going to Church at Christmas, because I have chosen to, but I know full well that the church will be loaded with people who are there because someone else is pushing them. Rather than just going along with whoever pressures you the most, take over your own Christmas by doing what you think is important.
- **If you want to give a gift, make it meaningful.** If not, don't. Useless gifts that nobody wants are such a waste. How many times have you received a Bounce Gift – one of those gifts that you receive, that only bounce in your life and then are out the door into the trash? Don't give Bounce gifts. All you are doing is perpetuating the problem. If you give a gift, make it meaningful (this doesn't necessarily mean expensive). If you can't think of anything meaningful to give, don't give anything at all. Take control of giving gifts this Christmas.
- **Don't fall for other people's manipulative games.** Christmas is not a time to play politics and favourites. It is not about behaving like spoilt children. If you choose not to spend your Christmas with someone manipulative, then there may be awkward consequences. Live with the consequences and move on, because you will still be way ahead if you steer your own course without manipulation. Of course this works both

ways. Don't waste time trying to play games with other people's lives either. Take over your own Christmas but don't try and take over others.

- **Do what you decide to do and forget about false guilt.** You may feel guilty about not doing something or not going somewhere, but if you have already decided, then stick to your decision. You owe it to yourself to do what you think is important. If you choose not to spend your Christmas with your toxic friend, then don't do it. Take over your Christmas by forgetting about false guilt.
- **As well as avoiding what you don't want your Christmas to be like, take steps to design a really great Christmas doing what is important to you.** My Christmas this year is going to be great. It will involve immediate family, skiing, friends, and no guilt. What about yours. Decide who you want to be with, where you will be, and what you will be doing. Take control of your Christmas by making a plan.
- **Try leaving your credit card at home leading up to Christmas.** That way, you will be less likely to spend money that you don't have. Try pre-planning what you will spend money on and sticking to your plan. Go to the shops with a list rather than a credit card. After Christmas is over, you will appreciate the debt that you don't have much more than the pleasure of giving gifts that were too expensive for your budget.



If something is wrong with your Christmas you still have time to set it right. Nobody is going to do it for you, it is up to you. Don't let this year be as stressful and frustrating as the last. Take back your Christmas this year and every year from now on.