



# Surviving Holiday Stress

IT'S CHRISTMAS, Thanksgiving, New Year's Day, or maybe a family reunion. Three generations of in-laws will spend a week parked in every corner of your home so everyone can have fun together—well, everyone except you. Your spouse is busy with extra church services and community outreach. You're working full-time. Your freezer is too small for all the food you'll need. You're coordinating the children's program. And your chances of having any fun during the event are about 0.01 percent.

Perhaps holidays aren't such a big thing in your culture, but there are other massive events in your church to manage, or big family gatherings that put pressure on your relationships.

How can you put loving God and loving others at the top of your priority list? How can you focus on what's most important, lower your expectations, share the load, and reduce each other's stress?

## SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

It's easy to get carried away with elaborate menus, decorated homes, idealistic expectations, and unnecessary traditions. Create a mini-retreat for yourself so you can reflect on the meaning and purpose of this celebration or family reunion. For Thanksgiving, focus on gratitude, study thankfulness in the Bible, and list your blessings. If you're focusing on Christmas, read the stories in the Bible, imagine the scenes, and focus on the key values of faith, hope, courage, hospitality, and generosity. Pray that your time together will be a refreshing blessing for everyone, including yourself, and ask God for His wisdom and balance.

## FOCUS ON VALUES RATHER THAN OBLIGATIONS

How can you reduce your workload? What can you and your family leave out and still make the celebration special? Set a price limit on gifts, or agree to donate money to a charity instead. Choose simpler menus, make simpler plans, work together on baking and decorating projects, and invite lonely people to join your family. Ask yourself how each activity helps you to experience and/or share God's love, and use that as your benchmark to guide your plans.

## MARRIAGE STAFF MEETING

Plan to support each other by having a marriage staff meeting when you're both relaxed and comfortable.

- Tell each other your hopes and concerns for the upcoming holidays.
- Mention appreciation for each other's support during previous holidays and gatherings.
- List everything you both need to do on different days to make the event smooth and successful. Include church, work, and family events. Also include every individual task, such as making up guest beds, buying and wrapping gifts, serving beverages, setting the table, clearing up, preparing vegetables, shopping for groceries, doing laundry, entertaining guests, and organizing a family outing or walk. This will help you to understand each other's workloads and stress points.
- Agree who will do what and when. Cross tasks off the list when they're completed to help you both keep track of tasks.
- Discuss your concerns and explore ways to manage stress points better.
- Explore how you could simplify the celebration to create more time to experience God's love and joy, and more time to share His love with your family and those who are hungry for hospitality.
- Plan regular breaks during the busy period so you can catch up with overdue tasks, chill out, or connect with each other.

## GET AHEAD

Identify all the tasks you can do in advance and scratch them off your list. If you give gifts, buy a few each month, wrap them, and label them. If you send cards, address them several months in advance, and write personal messages when you have a spare moment. Bake ahead, ask other guests to make and bring their favorite dishes, and look for good offers on ready-to-serve dishes.

## SCALE YOUR STRESS

Make a scale using numbers from 0 to 10, where 0 is no stress and 10 is extremely stressed. Place the scale where both you and your spouse can see it, such as on the refrigerator. Use two different magnets, which you can place along the scale to indicate your daily stress levels. Ask how you can support each other during the most stressful times.

## CARING CONNECTIONS

Schedule regular couple times for praying together, discussing ongoing needs, thanking each other, and

showing your care for each other. List at least 20 ways you can lovingly connect with each other in one minute. Generously scatter at least 10 of these caring moments throughout the day to help reduce stress, conflict, and resentment. Kiss, squeeze hands, smile, offer to help, make a drink, send a loving message, share a treat, and more.

## STRESS POINTS

Every family celebration includes tricky moments and conversations, whether it's managing Uncle Fred, who talks too much; soothing the small child who's struggling with sensory overload; listening to cousin Meg's endless complaints; or calming Tom and Mark's arguments about religion or politics.

Prepare some fun "minute to win it" games to distract people from awkward conversations. (Check out [www.thebudgetdiet.com/top-30-minute-to-win-it-games](http://www.thebudgetdiet.com/top-30-minute-to-win-it-games). Some of the ideas are better than others—use your good judgment). Introduce a gratitude activity whenever someone starts being critical or is complaining. Keep a handy list of things people can do to help you so you can invite them out of awkward conversations, such things as folding napkins, setting the table, preparing fruit and vegetables, or reading a story to the children.

When a topic of conversation treads on sensitive areas, try saying, "I hope you don't mind me changing the subject, but I really need your advice/help." Choose something that falls within their area of expertise and experience, such as gardening, cooking, or traveling. Or invite them to share favorite childhood memories with you.

## REFLECT GRATEFULLY

When all the intense activity has subsided, make space to reconnect as a couple and do something special together. Talk about what went well, appreciate each other's support, and list what you want to do differently next time. Talk warmly and creatively about how you'll improve these areas. Thank God for what went well, and ask Him to help you make next year even more successful. J

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