

## Managing Holiday Stress

by Kay Colbert, LCSW

Stress is a normal physiological and emotional response that we have when the demands on us seem greater than what we can handle. When our stress becomes chronic or acute, our body responds in ways that can cause health problems and emotional distress. Stress is one of the most commonly reported causes of drug and alcohol use and is often cited as the number one cause of addiction relapse. Learning good stress management skills can be useful any time of the year, but is especially needed around the holidays.

The time period starting from Thanksgiving and running through New Year's can make people feel unbalanced, especially for those in recovery. Many of us feel we have too much to do and too little time, we invite too many relatives to our house and spend too much money. We feel pressured and exhausted. The holiday season can trigger emotional highs and lows, which in turn can be a trigger for relapse for those in recovery from addictions.

We or our families may have impractical expectations about the holidays. We may be separated or estranged from loved ones. We may ruminate on resentments or personal losses. There may be memories of past overindulgences. Perhaps we have relationship problems or family tensions. Recognizing the possibility for holiday blues in advance and developing an advance plan, will help you confront any unpleasant experiences and handle them in a healthy way.

This year, take a deep breath, step back and plan ahead for good self-care. Here are some suggestions:

**Be realistic** about your emotional, physical and time limitations and don't push yourself beyond them. This is not the time to start complicated projects. This may not be the time to travel. Be willing to share responsibilities – you do not have to do everything yourself. Make a schedule of how relatives and friends coming over can help out and let everyone know what it is. Plan ahead. Try not to have unrealistic expectations of "perfect" holidays. Your normal everyday routines can provide consistency.

**Say no.** Sometimes families do not celebrate in a healthy or positive way. This might mean you don't get together with your parents or with Aunt Sue. Do not put yourself in situations that will have temptations present. Practice saying "no, but if I change my mind I'll let you know."

**Don't play games with your sobriety!** Clients too often tell me they can be around people who use alcohol or cocaine or marijuana because "that wasn't my drug of choice." This is a risky strategy.

**Be proactive.** Learn to say no to alcohol and other drugs in a way that is comfortable for you. If your friends or family members cannot celebrate the holidays without drinking or drugging, tell them you're sorry, but you've made other plans. Set boundaries. Yes, you have the right to ask people not to drink around you.

**Practice good self care.** Set aside some quiet time every day. Eat balanced meals at regular times. Be aware of how much nicotine, caffeine (that includes energy drinks) and sugar you are consuming. Exercise at least a little every day. Sleep, 8 hours at night, and get up in the morning. Lack of sleep or odd sleep patterns can contribute to fatigue, stress and mood swings. If you are on medication, take it as prescribed.

**Strengthen your support system.** Make plans now to touch base with your sponsor, therapist, support group or church group. Don't skip meetings. Keep the phone numbers of your sponsor and at least 3 other recovery people in your wallet to call if you start to feel overwhelmed.

**Create new sober ways to celebrate.** Do something for others and participate in some sober activities such as volunteering. Join the service work or holiday activities your local AA group has planned.

**Do self-check ins often.** Be aware of your body, your emotions, your thoughts. Know your "red flags" or warning signs.

**Take a time out.** If you begin to feel stressed, step outside or go somewhere quiet and spend a few minutes doing a de-stress activity. Starting with simple breath regulation can be helpful. It will immediately get oxygen to your brain and will slow down your heart rate and engage your body's natural relaxation response.

- 1) Take several slow, deep breaths from your belly. Place your hand on your stomach and feel it rise and fall with each breath. Count your breath in 1-2-3-4-5, hold for 2 counts and breath out slowly for 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 2) Count down slowly from 20 to 0. Take a slow, deep breath IN on 20, then breath OUT slowly on 19, IN on 18, OUT on 17, and so on.
- 3) Rub your palms together for a few seconds, until they are warm. Then place your hands gently over your eyes. Feel the warmth and take deep, slow breaths in and out, saying "I AM" on the in breath, and "CALM" on the out breath. Do this 10 times.

Wishing you serenity, courage and wisdom for the holidays!