



Dr. Joe's

Holiday Anger Management Guide

How to Have a Stress Free Holiday Season

by Joseph W. James, Ph.D.

Your first step towards a new life.

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Aah, the holidays...A time for relaxation and good cheer, an opportunity to share love with family and friends and to reflect upon the year past and the year to come. Making popcorn as the family gathers round to watch "Miracle on 34th Street" or "A Charlie Brown Christmas". Decorating the tree with Bing Crosby singing in the background as the season's first snow falls gently to the ground.

At least that's what all the tv specials and commercials say the holidays are like.

Instead, you're probably finding yourself sitting in traffic as you go from store to store, fighting your way through the mobs while trying to find the perfect gift for Aunt Emily who you barely know since the only time you see her is at Christmas and just what do you get someone who is 94 years old and spends all her time watching "Murder She Wrote" reruns on the Hallmark channel?

When you finally do find the singing bass for Uncle Wally you get to wait endlessly in line wondering how in the world you are going to pay for all this and why is it so damn hard to find that one video game your kid wants?

But I'm focusing on the negative. There are also the parties and the family get-togethers. In writing this special report I tried to find some statistics I once read on the spike in domestic violence and DUIs during the holiday season, but couldn't come across it. I do know that the holidays are typically the time of year when both of those are higher at that time of the year than any other. And its no wonder given the stress that goes into the holidays for most of us.

There is probably no getting around all the stress that is associated with the holidays, but that doesn't mean yours has to be miserable. My goal in writing this special report is to help you find ways to reduce your stress so that your Christmas is more like "White Christmas" than "National Lampoon's Christmas".

I'm going to break this report down into three sections:

- 1) How to work with your partner and immediate family to de-stress Christmas.
- 2) How to take care of yourself
- 3) How to plan family gatherings in a way that will minimize the stress associated with the holidays.

How to Make a Wonderful, Anger-Free Christmas for You and Your Immediate Family

It can be helpful (not to mention economical) to think of the holidays as a season, rather than as a build up to a special day, culminating in the opening of gifts. Like any other major event, it is often helpful to sit down well in advance and develop a plan of action.

For families, this starts with an agreement on what type of holiday experience you want your family to have. Agreeing on how the holidays should be celebrated is not always

easy, as partners often have had different experiences growing up, which can lead to very different expectations of how to celebrate the season as an adult.

Before deciding how to celebrate the holidays this year, take some time to discuss what the holidays were like for each of you as children.

- How many gifts were the norm?
- Was there pressure on family members to compete for the best gift?
- Was there travel to relatives or were the holidays spent at home?
- What was your best holiday memory?
- What was your worst?

This conversation can be fun and enlightening. It will deepen your relationship with your partner and can help you to understand why certain traditions are so important to each other.

Whether married, separated or divorced you will find that compromise, cooperation and understanding are key to providing a happy holiday experience for yourselves and your children.

Where Do You Go for the Holidays?

Where do you go to celebrate the holidays? This source of many an argument is really very simple to resolve. If there is a conflict, then the only fair way is to alternate each year.

Count the Cost

It is important to include a holiday budget in your discussion. Look very carefully at your regular

If you use a credit card to purchase gifts, make sure that you will be able to pay the bills off in full within one to three months at most, so you are not still paying for this holiday when the next one rolls around. The stress of constant indebtedness can add to holiday misery.

Even if you have unlimited resources, it is important to think about how much you want to give your kids, as it can serve as a model for them on how they will acquire things later in life.

This is not to say you shouldn't go a little overboard; holiday times are special and indulging a child's wishes more than usual is fine. The trick is to avoid going too far.

Family Time

After you have had your planning discussion as a couple (or developed a plan as a single parent), have a second conversation including the kids. Ask them what they would like to do to celebrate, not only on one day, but during the season as a whole.

Find simple, inexpensive things to do together such as baking cookies one night, making greetings cards together, taking a drive together to see the holiday lights, or watching a favorite program together.

The important thing is that you do things together as a family. Develop a calendar of activities and put it up somewhere where the whole family can see it and look forward to it.

Volunteering with your kids at a shelter, hospital or other place of need will encourage altruism and show your children how less fortunate people spend their holidays, but be sure to run it by them first to get their input. You, as parent, make the final decisions, but giving the kids a voice will head off a lot of problems.

Planning together helps you and your children to de-emphasize the importance of material gifts and to view the holidays as a season of goodwill.

Wants and Needs

One of the most difficult issues for parents is what to do when you simply cannot afford the gift your child wants. Kids will do their part in making this difficult by playing on your guilt — God bless them!

While children's behavior can be downright manipulative at times, understand that learning how to get what you want is an important developmental skill and that when kids are bugging you for the latest must-have toy, they are simply testing out different ways of getting what they want. (To fully appreciate what your child is experiencing, it might be helpful to remember the feeling you had when you first saw that shiny new car in the showroom.)

You may feel less pressure during the holidays if you can view the season as an opportunity to teach your children about prioritization of needs and delaying of gratification, rather than reacting out of guilt, anger or frustration when they begin to nag you about buying them this, that and the other thing.

It's OK, even healthy, for children to experience some disappointment. It helps them develop an appreciation of the value of a gift and the importance for everyone, including their parents, to live within their means.

A relatively painless way to teach kids this important lesson is to keep a "wish list" on hand for each child all year round. When the child sees something he or she wants, you

sit down together and add it to the wish list. When the holiday season rolls around (birthdays, too) and you have your budget in mind, sit down with your children and go over what they want. Depending on your budget and their wants, work with them to prioritize the gifts according to cost and/or number of gifts. Chances are they may try to talk you into getting more than you want to give them. Remember, this is natural, so try not to get mad; the lesson you are trying to teach them is to differentiate want from need.

When going over the wish list with your kids, try to keep their age and level of understanding in mind. Kids under the age of 4 are very likely too young to use the wish list. A child under 7 is not very likely to understand the relationship between a budget and gifts.

Try to explain your limitations in a way they can understand, perhaps telling them that Santa's sleigh will hold only so many toys, for example. For older kids and teens it may be appropriate to limit them to a certain dollar amount or a certain number of gifts.

Regardless of the age of your child, it is often a good idea to surprise them with a gift or two that you hadn't said you would get them. After all, part of the fun of a holiday is in the surprise and too much emphasis on the wish list may cause the holidays to represent nothing more than a time for negotiation in kids' minds.

It is also important to take the age of your child into consideration when deciding the type of gifts to get them. Many parents share the story of buying their 2-year-old an extravagant gift only to find that the toddler was more interested in the wrapping paper and the box than the gift itself.

Another useful tool is to remember how your children reacted to the holidays in years past. Did they play with one toy? Did they seem overly excited by the number of presents? Did they appear over stimulated by a particular type of toy? Your previous holiday experiences with your kids will be one of your best barometers in planning for enjoyable holidays in the future.

Whatever strategy you decide to use in buying gifts for the holidays, the important thing is to keep it reasonable and within your budget.

Planning the holidays, from where to spend them, to the budget, to what types of gifts to give, to which activities you share takes work. However, it can be time well spent resulting in a holiday season that leaves you feeling both sane and solvent. More importantly, it won't leave you with memories which make you shudder, but ones you and your family will cherish for years to come.

Taking Care of You During the Holidays

As I was describing in the previous section, your goal this holiday season should be to make it a meaningful experience instead of a stress filled month. This means setting your priorities, setting boundaries, doing what feels good to you and not trying to jump through every hoop that is presented to you.

The first things to ask yourself are “what feels good to me, what do I enjoy?” If going to every single party or holiday is causing you more stress than fun then cut back or stop doing them. Its ok to say no. People, even family will get over it.

One of the most common holiday stressors I hear from many of my clients is that the worst part of the holiday season is traveling to or spending the holiday at their parents house because there inevitably is chaos, fighting, and arguing that may bring back bad, old childhood feelings. Its almost like crossing that threshold takes you back all those years and all the grudges start coming out. And yet, despite the misery that many experience they feel as if they could never not go back to mom and dad’s for the holiday. Instead of forcing yourself into that situation stay home and start new traditions with your own family.

Here’s a list or tips on how to deal with holiday stress. The less stress you feel the less likely you are to become angry. The first four are focused on being aware of and managing your stress. The rest are concrete ways to cut down on the amount of tension you might be experiencing.¹

1. **Tune into and catch your stress early.** Most of you are so used to walking around feeling stressed out that you aren’t even aware of it building up inside of you. For many its like a stair step approach where it keeps building and building until all of a sudden KABLOOEY!!

Try to tune into how stressed you are on a scale from one to ten. When you find yourself getting up around a four or five, take a break, take a nap, get some exercise, go for a walk, take a bath, do something for at least half an hour.

Right around here is when people start telling me all the reasons this is impossible for them because of the kids or they have so much to do, etc. Sorry, I don’t buy it. You will be more effective and get more done in a shorter period of time if you take the time off to take care of you. Slower is sometimes faster. Make the time to relax.

2. **Do things differently this year:** Shop earlier. Get more family support. Take time off from work. Request more civil behavior from family members. More on this below.

3. **Try looking at things in a different light.** Life really is the story we tell ourselves. That's why one person can feel tremendous stress doing something while someone else can feel relaxed doing the same thing. Thing may be hard or something you don't particularly want to do but they are only perceived as stressful if that is how you see them.

Slow down, become aware of how you are thinking about things. Ask yourself what kind of mood this line of thinking is likely to put you in and if this is how you want to feel. If not ask yourself how you would rather feel and try to think of a different story to tell yourself that would make you feel this way.

This is another one of those things that people tell me is impossible. Its not impossible, but it might be hard at first because the stories you tell yourself are such a strong habit that its going to take some practice to change. But you can do it! Just like everything else, practice makes perfect and you've had a lot of practice telling yourself those same old stories. Make the effort to tell yourself new ones and you within a couple weeks it will start becoming natural.

4. **Take care of yourself.** Get the right amount of rest.. Eat right. Exercise. Keep an eye on how much you drink. Get your needs met. Enjoy yourself!.

And now, some more concrete tips:

- Develop your holiday budget. Make it comprehensive - include not just gifts but things like decorations, tree, special dinners, etc.. Once you've made your make the financial plan, stick to it. Having this drawn up in advance will make you aware of exactly how much you are spending and keep you from overdoing it.
- Times are tough for many of us right now. If you have a limited budget talk to those you exchange gifts to set a reasonable spending limit or decide to only give presents to the children on your gift list.
- Make your shopping list up before you leave the house. It helps to eliminate all the time you normally may spend aimlessly wandering the mall wondering what gifts to get. You save time, energy and stress.
- Avoid the crowds all together and do your shopping online or through catalogues.
- If you are hosting a holiday dinner make the plans in advance. Making lists helps to take away a lot of the worry and stress surrounding the upcoming gathering. Make lists of guests, the foods you are going to serve, the ingredients you need to buy and anything else you need for the day.
- Allow others to help you: you can't do it all. Enlist family and friends to help with decorating, baking cookies, or any other holiday activity that you do not particularly enjoy.
- Delegate, delegate, delegate. If you are hosting family or friends don't try to provide all of the food and entertainment. Ask each family member to bring a dish or favorite game. Most people bring things over anyway, so rather than have it a random collection of wine and jello molds that no one really wants, organize a pot luck gathering.

How to Have Anger- Free Holiday Gatherings

Family celebrations can be the most wonderful experiences of the holidays. They also have the most potential for angry fights. After all, while you may love your family you've also had a whole lifetime to build up resentments towards them too. Add the stress of the holidays and a little booze and you may have a recipe for disaster.

Because of this its good to plan ahead. What have been triggers for problems in the past? Maybe your brother in law Steve has started things out by drinking too much which caused your sister Betty to get all lathered up which in turn caused Steve to go off because he felt she was trying to ruin his holiday by telling him what to do.

If there have been no problems in the past, is there potential for any this year? Is anyone feuding with anyone else? Is there someone who gets on everyone's nerves?

Once you've identified potential flash points ask yourself what you can do differently this year. Would limiting alcohol to a glass of wine for a toast at dinner make for a more peaceful day? Would not expecting people to travel long distances or perhaps arranging for them to stay at a hotel cut down on the stress?

If there is a problem person, say Steve, who drinks too much or tends to do things that gets on peoples nerves you might want to think about having a chat with this person sometime before the holiday celebration. Its best if you could talk in person and that you approach this person in a caring fashion, conveying that your concern is to help him or her have a better holiday celebration than in years past. For instance, you could discuss how you would be more comfortable if a particular topic (insert family feud issue here) were avoided, so that everyone can have a nice family gathering. Be sure to use "I" and "we" language, instead of "you." By discussing how "We would feel more comfortable if..." this will avoid making the family member with whom you are talking feel as if they are being accused.

Here are four tips to make holiday celebrations with family members more pleasant:

1. **Be careful about the amount of alcohol served.** As Homer Simpson says "Alcohol – the cure to and the cause of all of life's problems." Alcohol may help to loosen you up and relax, but different people react in different ways to alcohol. We've all heard of the mean drunk. Or somebody may be too relaxed and let something slip which starts a fight. Try to keep it down to two drinks maximum.
2. **Be realistic about your family.** If Uncle Roy has told the same story year after year, he's going to do it again. If your Aunt Tilly has a habit of criticizing

everything she is still going to do that. Tell yourself that you only have to see him or her for a few hours once a year. See if you can find some humor in it.

3. **Let bygones be bygones.** People often think of their anger as a way of keeping the one who hurt them in a kind of emotional prison. As long as they held onto the anger and bitterness, the wrongdoer stays in jail. But when you really stop and think about it, the only one who is really in an emotional prison is you. More often than not, the person you are pissed at is either unaware, doesn't care or simply don't give it as much thought as you. Meanwhile, you walk around stewing and obsessing over the wrong that was done to you. Your anger ends up affecting you more than the one who hurt you.

It's the holidays – give yourself the gift of letting go of old grudges

4. **Try to be more empathic.** We all see the world differently and as crazy or irritating as some people's behaviors might be it can look very different when seen through their eyes. Seeing the world through someone else's perspective is the magic bullet for anger – it just melts away.

Wishing you and yours a happy and anger free holiday season!