

Establish a game plan to reduce holiday stress

Darla Carter, Louisville 3:09 p.m. EST November 19, 2014



(Photo: Fuse / Getty Images/Fuse)

With Thanksgiving around the corner and December holidays approaching fast, it's time to get your game plan together for handling aspects of the season that can get on your last nerve, make you sad or just plain mad.

Yes, we're talking about the relatives that push your buttons, social schedules booked to the max and the annual pressure to decorate like Martha Stewart, cook like a Food Network chef and, of course, spend, spend, spend.

"Sometimes people feel like they have to go above and beyond (with) the gift planning and everything else," said Eli Karam, a marriage and family therapist at the University of Louisville.

But we've got some stress-busting tips for you.

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Get organized: Karam, an associate professor in the [Kent School of Social Work \(http://louisville.edu/kent/\)](http://louisville.edu/kent/), suggests setting up a master schedule, using something like Google calendar, to help keep up with activities and to enable everyone in the family to list their holiday invitations and appointments. Then figure out which ones are doable.

Don't wait until the last minute: Especially if you're planning something complicated, "get started early," said Jim Sennett, a licensed clinical social worker with [Baptist Health Counseling \(http://baptisteast.com/baptisteast/behavioralhealth\)](http://baptisteast.com/baptisteast/behavioralhealth).

Rally the troops: Don't be afraid to ask for help in creating a festive gathering or meal. "It can be a nice, rewarding collaborative experience," Karam said.

Sennett agreed: "A lot of people would like to be helpful and would like to have some kind of genuine, more-integral part of the situation and not have the one person carry the whole burden."

Slow down: "Most people, if they'll slow down and really think about what they're going, they tend to make different choices," Sennett said.

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Focus: Do you take on too much? Instead of trying to do everything, focus on one or two things that are your signature, and do them well, Karam said.

Break free: Don't assume that you must follow the exact same holiday routine every year, Sennett said. "It's usually that thing that's never discussed," he said. People "just keep doing the same old thing and never question it." If you're ready for a change, have a frank discussion with your family and give yourself permission to switch things up.

Discuss spending: Have a realistic talk with your partner about the budget to make sure you don't have different expectations, Karam said. When the credit card bill comes in, it can take the joy out of giving, he said.

Also, ask yourself whether you're buying a gift that the recipient really wants, or "are you just buying stuff to buy stuff?" Sennett said. Maybe you could make a donation to a charity the person values, or pledge to do a meaningful task, such as raking leaves, at the person's home.

Get social: If you've just ended a relationship or aren't with your usual crew for some reason, find a surrogate family or other support network. "You don't want to be alone on these major holidays," Karam said, because it can really mess with your head and send you "into a funk."

Volunteer: Don't feel like partying? An alternative would be to find a project to get involved with, such as volunteering at your place of worship or a homeless shelter. That can provide "a sense of being connected or giving back," Karam said.

Honor lost loved ones: Establish a ritual to honor loved ones who've passed away, Karam said. For example, if there was a tradition that you all shared, find "some way for you to carry that on and put your own spin on it."



Christmas stress (Photo: Maridav / Getty Images/iStockphoto)

Set boundaries: It might be time to ask irritable Uncle Al and messy Aunt Mavis to get a hotel room instead of having them stay at your house the entire vacation. That way, "everybody can kind of retreat to their own space a little bit and catch their breath," Sennett said. "I don't think it's necessarily the greatest thing to just cram everybody all together for a long period of time and think everything is always going to be rosy. I think that's a little naive."

Compromise: If there's tension about which side of the family to spend the holidays with, try to come up with a system that's equitable and try to understand your partner's point of view, Karam said. Don't get caught in a turf war.

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Be discreet: If you fear that your spouse will reveal private information at a gathering, discuss ahead of time what shouldn't be shared. You can also establish a code word or phrase that either of you can use to signal that

it's time to skedaddle from the holiday spot.

Relax: Consider planning a vacation within a vacation, Karam said. For example, if you'll be spending a few days with your children's grandparents, they might be willing to watch the kids while you and your spouse do something on your own.

Seek professional help if needed: "It's very common that individuals or couples will go in to consult a therapist," Karam said. "... It's kind of a checkup and a proactive stance on how to interact" with difficult relatives.

Beat the blues: It also can be helpful to see a therapist if you're someone who tends to be blue during the holiday season. Do it now instead of letting the holidays sneak up on you, Sennett said.

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