

## Managing holiday stress



*by Joyce Suter*

Recently I heard someone say, “It’s only 100 days until Christmas” and I felt a bit of a jolt. I recognized that familiar anxiety, and I began to think about what is behind the stress I feel around the holidays.

One thing I know is that I am not alone—despite all the glowing, magical Christmas scenes portrayed to stir nostalgia and sell products, we find that the holidays can, indeed, be the best and worst of times. We can remember those special times with families and friends, the Christmas pageant or candlelight service where we were in touch with the spirit of Christmas. We can also remember the worst of times, when caught up in our desire to do it all and be it all we were robbed of the joy we hoped to create. Each year I have hopes of preventing the mistakes of Christmases past. From a distance (January) this seems quite possible. I compare it to my usual late summer aspiration for a better garden next spring.

So, this year I want to make my favorite holiday foods, enjoy all the buffets and potlucks—but not stuff myself. I plan to shop early and do without the frustration and fatigue of waiting till last minute. I will have those small thank you gifts ready to deliver when needed. I will host or attend family gatherings fully prepared and transcending all discord—appreciating everyone and the chance to be together again another year. I will reach out to those who are alone or feeling the loss of someone. I will follow a daily advent meditation and light a candle for each Sunday. I should add to remember to extinguish the candles as I recall leaving the house after one family advent worship, returning to find a campfire glowing inside the window.

Many of us cannot reshape the expectations of the holidays. At times the pressure to eat and prepare food can be overwhelm-

ing, especially to those who are trying to achieve a healthy weight. After the holidays most of us have added 5 to 7 pounds. In addition to that, we have altered our daily routine with extra activities leaving us exhausted and fatigued. Physical exercise is essential at this time to relieve stress, promote sleep, burn up excess calories, and simply make us feel better. At family gatherings—can we curtail the smorgasbord and take the food away after serving? Typically, it is not a nutritional need that drives us from the television to the cheese, nuts, or candy. We eat it because it is there. Instead of the extended buffet we can have a ping-pong tournament or a soccer game. Our family takes a brisk walk to a nearby bridge, which energizes us and gives us a chance to actually visit with each other.

This year, I want to look for ways to limit the baking and decorating to something more manageable! When hanging lights and decorating cookies bring on a tension headache, it is time to stop. When the fun rituals aren't living up to our expectations, we need to pause and recognize that a picture-perfect Christmas can be void of happiness. If gift exchanges have become a hassle or an obligation—and surely most of us do not need more things—we can choose, rather, to spend the money for a service activity, give money or gifts to a needy family, or celebrate with a family getaway.

I know that this year for the holidays I will not get it just right as I might imagine. But I hope that I will plan ahead, keep things low-key enough that I can keep a routine that allows for controlled eating, consistent exercise, and proper rest. Perhaps a more realistic goal is to start with the one thing that is most stressful—such as last-minute shopping or dealing with the daily desserts at work.

I want most of all to experience again joy and hope as God's gift of salvation was brought to us that amazing night we celebrate. In the brightness of that guiding star—everything else about the holidays will pale in its shadow.

How many days is it now until Christmas? ❏