THE CATALYST

Add wellness to your holiday to-do list

By: Nicole Chevrier | Posted: December 8, 2022

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This blog post discusses trauma and eating disorders.

Does the festive winter holiday season give you the warm fuzzies? “It’s the most wonderful time of the year”, goes the classic sung by Andy Williams:

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year
With the kids jingle belling
And everyone telling you “Be of good cheer”
It’s the most wonderful time of the year
It’s the hap-happiest season of all”

Does the prospect of the holidays make you feel cheerful? Personally, the thought of all this forced merry making makes me want to run for the hills. All I can think about is the long to-do list that goes with all of this festivity. I go out of my way to avoid the marketing and all the idealized images of the perfect festive season. All the trimmings and the trappings of all the things we are supposed to want and need.

If you haven’t guessed it by now, dear reader, I am one of those people who does not celebrate the holidays. At least not the way we are made to feel that we need to (I will not use the word ‘grinch’ here, but you can draw your own conclusions). I pretty much try to ignore the entire array of holiday season stuff altogether. Shopping, presents, trees, decorations, chestnuts roasting on the open fire (well, I am ok with this one), Secret Santa, holiday get togethers, work parties, cocktail parties, galas, and overconsumption. And don’t even ask me if I am baking cookies. Seriously. It’s a punishing marathon I abandoned years ago.

On the other hand, I wouldn’t expect everyone to feel the same way. But even if you love the season, just know that if you are feeling the pressure of the obligations and the social expectations, not to mention the financial stress, you are not alone. Holiday stress affects so many of us, and it can aggravate pre-existing mental health issues for some people.

So, let’s consider what you can do to enjoy the season and keep body, mind, and soul together.

Family time

Socializing is a big part of the season. Spending time with loved ones and seeing friends is the very best part of the festivities. But it should be pointed out that for some people, attending family gatherings can be a source of stress. Feelings around complex relationships, childhood

difficulties, and family tensions can get intensified at this time of year. For many people who live with the experience of trauma, feeling forced to spend time with family can surface difficult feelings. While it may not be possible to avoid spending time with people who trigger difficult feelings or memories, there are coping strategies that can help.

Socializing

You might also feel obligated to attend social activities associated with work or other social connections. For people who struggle with social anxiety, these situations can be daunting. When I find myself headed for some kind of large social event, I often find myself feeling tense and irritable instead of relaxed and cheerful.

It's not that I dislike people. I want to connect, but I sometimes feel anxiety around meeting new people and find it difficult to open up conversations. I dread party chit chat. I also sometimes find it draining to be surrounded by a large group.

Unfortunately, it's not possible to forgo every invitation, as I do actually have a social and work network, so I rely on the principle that it is possible to politely decline. I try to attend the events that are the most meaningful to my social circles. Here are some more great principles to keep in mind:

1. You don't need to attend every event. Choose the ones that are the best fit for you. Some people find large events fun and exciting and feel more uncomfortable in small, intimate settings. For others, it is the reverse. Everyone is different.
2. Give yourself permission to leave after 30 minutes if that's what you need to do. Just knowing that can help you to relax and enjoy the moment.
3. Use the buddy system. Find someone to go with. It will make things easier and more enjoyable.

Well-being and complex relationships with food

Getting together for meals is a big part of holiday festivities but if you are coping with an eating disorder, the holiday season can be a source of stress. While it might be the only opportunity to see your family or to re-connect with old friends, the disruption of the everyday routine can throw things out of balance, upsetting good habits and routines for maintaining your well-being.

If you feel anxious or concerned about food, remember that you have the power to not let mealtimes become the focus of your day. Balance out your day with other types of healthy activities such as getting outside, enjoying cultural events, and other activities which don't involve food.

It's important to remember that while family or friends may not be able to relate or fully understand your needs or situation, there is non-judgmental and confidential support available, including help lines and live chat.

Overindulging

With all this partying going on, there are some very good reasons to be concerned about over-indulging. Most celebrations tend to involve drinking alcohol. Some people might feel anxious about relapsing into drinking alcohol. There can be social pressure to indulge in some 'holiday

cheer’. If you know someone who is concerned about their sobriety, you can be helpful by supporting that person to make the choices that are right for them. It might be simply offering them a ride home or to a meeting. Or it could be an invitation to leave the party and go somewhere else. If it’s you who is struggling, remember there are supports out there for you.

3 simple tips to reduce holiday stress

Lower your expectations

The holidays might be called the happiest time of the year, but is that always true? Remind yourself that it’s impossible to meet everyone’s expectations, including your own. Try to spend less time on social media – comparing yourself to others is the surest route to feeling disappointed.

Include self-care into your routine

Making plans to spread love and joy to others needs to include yourself. Self-care may be the most precious gift you can give to yourself.

Plan in advance

Is your to-do list reasonable? Think of what you can give up this year because the only thing you should never give up on is your health.

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