

Sustaining yourself through the holidays

BY CORA-ELLEN LUKE

Whether you celebrate your holidays at this time of year or at some other time, for many of us the holidays can be characterized by the stress created by our expectations. But if we remember a few “Ps and Qs,” we can create wholeness and restfulness, rather than fragmentation and frenzy, during this busy time.

The Present

Give yourself a present - the present moment. It's all any of us really have anyway, for the past is gone and the future unknown. Try really paying attention to your surroundings, to others who are with you, to what you see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Remind yourself that this moment is good enough.

Pass on Perfection

You aren't perfect, and neither is anyone else. In fact, given the demands of the holidays for many of us, we are likely to be especially imperfect at this season! So keep your expectations of yourself and others reasonable and kind. Don't strive for the “perfect holiday.” It's a surefire way not to have one.

Preconceived Ideas

Let them go! Review your holiday traditions and sort out which ones you truly enjoy and value from those that you are doing out of habit, or because someone expects you to, or because the media pushes the idea. Consider modifying some traditions so that they are more realistic for your situation, or let them go entirely, or replace them with new traditions.

Quiet

In many cultures, what is regarded as sacred during the winter holidays includes silence, quiet, taking the time to be still for prayer, contemplation, mindfulness, or gratitude. Try to spend at least a little time in this holiday season in a quiet state. Set aside distractions and busyness, even if only briefly, and savor the cup of tea, watch the flames dance in the fireplace, see the beauty in snow falling on trees. If you have children in your immediate or extended family, try inviting them to do the same. Suggest that you all be quiet for one minute and notice something in your surroundings. Then have each person describe what they noticed, while the others listen fully.



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Cora-Ellen, above, is a clinician and workplace consultant for the Cornell Employee Assistance Program.

Planning

Get real about your time and money. If the holiday season usually leaves you feeling overwhelmed and overstretched, don't expect it to be different this year unless you do something different. Create and use a master calendar and budget. Feel free to say these words: “let me get back to you on that.” This gives you a chance to take a look at your schedule or budget, and decide whether fitting in that “one more thing” is worth it.

If you are worried about being lonely, make plans now to get together with friends, to join spiritual or social gatherings, or to volunteer in a community service. It is also ok to spend time alone during the holidays. List enjoyable things you can do on your own that don't fit in your everyday schedule.

Question

Ask yourself, “what two or three things/activities/events give me the most satisfaction and meaning at this holiday?” These may be very simple things, not necessarily expensive or complex ones. Ask the same question of your family members or friends. Answering these questions will help you to focus on those few things, rather than be overwhelmed by trying to do too much.

Permission

Give yourself permission to think and feel the way you do and to make the choices that are best for you. Some

people truly enjoy the holidays. But if you are grieving the loss of a loved one or any other loss, the holiday season may not be a special or satisfying time for you. Know that you are not alone – many people struggle with grief during the holidays. Remind yourself, too, that even during grief we can experience some good moments, and it's important to notice those moments. The holiday season will soon pass.

Pacing

When you do try something new, expect others to resist initially. It's a normal human response to change. Because of that, avoid trying to change too much all at once. Take a few steps in the direction of change this holiday, and consider adding one or two more changes next year.

Note: If you feel overwhelmed, depressed, or very anxious despite your own efforts to cope with the holidays, talk to an EAP counselor, any other mental health provider, or your doctor. At Cornell EAP (607-255-1531), we focus on helping you find another approach to your difficulties that will be more effective for you. All consultations are kept confidential.