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Lori Wright

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Don't Let Holiday Stress Turn You Into A Frenetic, Miserable Nutcase

Health Psychologist Offers Tips On How To Stay Happy During The Holidays

Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

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EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, research associate professor of psychology with the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, can be reached at 603-428-8215 and kkendallt@aol.com.

DURHAM, N.H. -- While songs claim that it is the "most wonderful time of the year," many people dread the winter holiday season. But it is possible to have a holiday season that is enjoyable for everyone — even those Martha Stewart types who aim to plan gatherings reminiscent of a Currier and Ives Christmas card.

"There are media images of attractive friends and family gathering for the holidays. They all look like they are having more fun than you. This can breed a sense of discontent about your life. Is it any wonder that many people feel seriously depressed at this time of year?" says Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, research associate professor of psychology with the Family Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire.

Is there a way to get through the holidays without feeling frazzled, overloaded and exhausted? Can you celebrate in such a way that you feel lifted up rather than worn down? According to Kendall-Tackett, a health psychologist and author of *The Well-Ordered Home*, the answer to both questions is yes. Here are some simple steps.

Keep your expectations realistic.

"We shouldn't expect week upon week of unending happiness during the holidays. There will be ups and downs just like during the rest of the year. Nor should we expect our homes, families and ourselves to look and behave like the mythic creatures on television and in magazines. This is particularly important with families with young children. Changes in normal routines may make them feel 'off.' They may hate their dress-up clothes that Grandma sent, and are at their limits by the time everyone sits down to eat. It would be better to have a low-key holiday that everyone enjoys," she says.

Reach out to others.

"In attempting to keep up with our long list of 'shoulds,' it's very easy to get focused only on ourselves or the needs of our immediate families. You may come away from the holidays feeling like you haven't 'measured up.' Sometimes the best antidote for this self-focus is reaching out to someone who truly has less," she says.

Kendall-Tackett suggests finding out about opportunities for helping others who have a tough

time during the holidays and involving the entire family. Groups in need can include children of prisoners, patients in nursing homes, homeless people, or those who have lost their jobs. Families can even request that money that would have been spent on gifts be forwarded instead to one of these charities.

"Or you can simply reach out to the people in your neighborhood who are alone for the holidays. This can be a wonderful opportunity to spend some quality time together, and do some good for others at the same time," she says.

Make conscious choices about which rituals you want to participate in.

Many times, people run from one holiday activity to another, not really enjoying any of them. It is far better to pick the most meaningful ones.

"Be honest with yourself. Do you really enjoy baking? Or holiday cards? Or matching outfits for everyone? Or home decorations that look like Martha Stewart is stopping by? If your answer is yes, then by all means continue. If the answer is no, then think about dropping the activities you don't like, or assigning them to someone else," Kendall-Tackett says.

Take care of your body.

This time of year people are prone to abuse their bodies with excess sweets, snacks, rich food and alcohol. And because of a time shortage, there is a tendency to sleep and exercise less. "Come January, people feel totally trashed, are probably heavier, and are all ready for the guilt campaigns designed to sell us exercise equipment and diet products in the new year," she says.

Kendall-Tackett's advice: only eat the holiday treats you really want. Promise that you won't stay up late making holiday preparations because you've have pared your activities down to a reasonable amount. Take the time to rest even if it means that some things won't get done. And promise to take the time to enjoy friends and family instead of running frantically from one activity to another.

"It is possible for us to get through the holidays with a sense of sanity and balance. Let's all resolve to make conscious choices about how much we want to do this year. Everyone in our lives will notice a difference. And maybe this year, the holidays can be fun," she says.