

Good Mental Health & the Holidays

By Larry Deavers

There are many aspects to look forward to during the holiday season such as time off work, family visits, holiday traditions, and special meals. However, many of the things we associate with the joys of the holiday season are also the very ones that escalate our stress, such as extended contact with family members, days of unstructured time, forced interactions with trying relatives, or experiencing the absence of a recently lost loved one.

Our time, energy and resources are limited and how much we have to offer others is often determined by the life circumstances we are facing at any given time. Sometimes, this time of year can also dredge up memories of painful past experiences and unresolved childhood traumas. How do you

manage everything that's expected of you during the holidays, while still allowing you to take care of yourself during this time of year? Here are some ideas to help you prepare your own survival strategy this year.

1 Many people, both children and adults, experience painful emotions associated with the holidays. Be sensitive to any sadness, loneliness, or renewed grief they may be experiencing, particularly if they have lost a loved one over the last year and this is their first holiday season without them. Without being intrusive, offer a comment that lets them know you are aware of the loss, but not pressing them to talk (e.g., "I remember Dad always said this was his favorite time of year."). This invites them to share their thoughts without pressing them to discuss it. If you are experiencing your own painful emotions and don't want to talk, prepare a gentle way of letting others know that you appreciate their concern, but just are not at a place where you can discuss it right now.

2 One way to handle the recent loss of a family member is to make plans to honor those who have passed on as a part of your holiday experience. This might include making a special memorial in the home where your family gathers, offering an opportunity for family members to share individual memories about that person, or carrying on a tradition that was a favorite of theirs. Remember that it is okay to be sad. There is no way to replace the presence of a loved one who has passed away, but one way of coping is to honor their

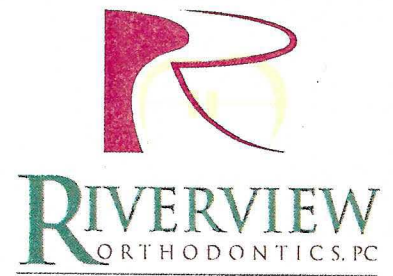


NOVEMBER EVENTS
 11/02: Storm SCIENCE! Thunder, weather vanes & hurricane art!
 11/09: CHOM Rocks! #TheKindnessRocksProject #CHOMRocks #ALRocks
 11/16: Fables & Fairy Tales! Nat'l Young Readers Week! STEAM projects!
 11/23: Autumn Comucopia! Relays, scarecrows & painting!
 11/30: Show Your Spirit! Endurance FX Game Zone!

DECEMBER EVENTS
 12/07: Happy Birthday Tuscaloosa!
 12/14: Breakfast at the North Pole! Pre-register NOW!
 Three seatings: 8am • 9:45am • 11:30am
 12/21: Christmas Around the World
 12/28: Arctic Wild!

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memory by focusing on their legacy and any ways they made your lives better.

3 Try to incorporate some kind of physical activity into your holiday schedule. If you already have a routine of exercise, do what you can to maintain your normal routine. If you do not, then try making time for a couple of long walks, either with a low-stress buddy, or alone. This will help you decompress from the on-going contact with relatives and release you from the pressure of being “on” all the time. Try to stick to your normal routines (e.g., exercise, eating, rest, sleep, etc.). Generally, routines are good for mental health. This will help your mind and body maintain a sense of normalcy, be less taxing and maximize many of your normal coping skills for handling daily stress.

4 Set realistic expectations for how much you’ll be able to squeeze into your holidays. If you often feel overwhelmed by all the holiday activities, plan ahead to pick a certain number of events that you believe you can participate in without over-taxing your resources of time, energy and finances. It will make a more pleasant experience for everyone to have you more relaxed and present at a few events, rather than emotionally absent and exhausted as you try to do it all.

5 If you know you are going into a situation that will almost certainly tax your patience, good-will and sanity, plan ahead and give yourself a couple of strategies to draw on, such as some deep breathing exercises, making a run to the store, taking a walk, or preparing a couple of carefully planned statements you can make to deflect a conversation that makes you uncomfortable (e.g., “I’ve decided to hold off on thinking about that during the holidays.”, “I’d like a little more time before I can make a final decision.”, or “I appreciate your input; I plan to give that more thought once the new year begins.”)

The key is to remember to set your own limits of what you are able to do

to support and be gracious to others without sacrificing your own mental health. With a little planning, you can increase the chances that this holiday season may create some new pleasant family memories.

Larry Deavers is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and Executive Director of Family Counseling Service of West Alabama.



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