

Stop Stressing and Enjoy the Holiday Season, MU Expert Offers Tips

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If this time of year brings to mind the joyful happiness and tingly feelings brought forth at the conclusion of the holiday classic “It’s a Wonderful Life,” then a big let-down may be in store, according to a University of Missouri-Columbia psychology expert. In fact, high expectations can be the first step on the road to a stressful holiday season.

“The notion that everything should be so wonderful and perfect during the holiday season is unrealistic,” said Laurie Mintz, associate professor of educational, school and counseling psychology in the MU College of Education. “Don’t expect an abysmal holiday, but do have realistic expectations. Hopefully, there will be joyful moments, but also anticipate ups and downs.”

Buying gifts can be a stressful task emotionally and financially. Mintz says meaningful gifts – such as home-baked cookies or a coupon for an evening of babysitting – don’t have to break the bank. Try to start a system with relatives in which everyone shops for one another’s gifts.

“If you buy a gift for your niece every year and your sister buys one for your child, talk to your sister about each of you purchasing an extra gift for your own children in the same price range while you are both out shopping. Trade the gifts and your shopping for each other’s children is done,” Mintz said.

Often, people struggle to think of an idea for someone and this approach

ensures people receive a gift they like and it makes shopping easier and less time consuming.

“Check your list and ask if there are people you are buying gifts for that you can let go,” Mintz suggests. “Be brave enough to approach the topic with people. Perhaps ask a few friends if they would be open to putting a stop to the mutual gift exchanges. Most likely you will find that it eases their burden too. A good friendship all year long is really the best gift anyway.”

Have realistic expectations when it comes to spending time with family. It is important to find a balance between family connections and individual boundaries. Mintz says people often struggle between doing what they are “supposed to” and doing what they want to do. She suggests clearly communicating decisions about where to spend the holiday time and letting family members know the process used to determine the decision. Be honest about feeling torn. If serious issues exist, seek therapy to work through feelings and emotions in advance to be better able to deal with whatever issues may arise during the holidays.

The lack of time or the “holiday crunch” is often a great source of stress for many people. Mintz says people often try to stretch themselves too thin by attending everything they are invited to. It’s okay to say no and choose fewer events to attend. This allows people to slow down and enjoy each event. Another source of stress, especially for women, is the plethora of holiday food available throughout November and December.

“This is where self-care comes in,” Mintz said. “Exercise should be a part of everyone’s routine all year and it is especially important not to let it go during the holiday season. It actually decreases stress in the long run. The people who say they do not have time to exercise are the ones who need it the most.”

There is a big difference between being selfish and self-care, according to Mintz. She says by taking care of oneself, everyone benefits because people are happier, healthier and will live longer.

“Stop comparing yourself to everyone around you,” Mintz said. “It always seems like everyone else is handling the season better than you, but that is only because everyone puts on their happy face in front of others. Slow down and talk to people; you will find that they are stressed too and just sharing thoughts and feelings with others may make you feel better.”

Source: University of Missouri

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