

Avoiding Christmas stress

December 4 2013, by Amanda Horswill



Dr Leith Henry

If all you want to do is Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas but are instead too stressed trying to Deck the Halls to feel Joy to the World, it's time to take a Christmas reality check.

QUT Rehabilitation and Wellness manager Dr Leith Henry, a psychologist, said it was easy to fall prey to the same less-than-perfect holiday behaviour patterns year after year. Instead, this year give yourself the ultimate Yuletide present - treat angst-filled Christmases to an emotional make-over.

"Christmas can be a very stressful time for people," Dr Henry said. "It does not have to be.

"Often, people hold [unrealistic expectations](#) about what the days should be. They have this picture in their head - the perfect Disney day with all

the trimmings and everyone is completely happy and every morsel of food is delicious.

"It's not in one person's control to have a `perfect' day.

"It might help to know exactly what you do want to experience. Determine your priorities, your values and the definition of what a `good Christmas' is to you. And then make plans around that.

"Reflect on what is meaningful to you and create your own traditions and rituals.

"And take the focus of just that one day by shifting perspective to the holiday `season'."

She said the key to Christmas resilience was to realise those anxiety-triggering circumstances which happen every year and then to work out a strategy to change them.

For example, the Santa tradition for many families represents a large financial burden. Consider an alternative, such as playing "Secret Santa" in larger families so you only have to buy one gift; or set a dollar-value limit that everyone agrees to stay below.

"And there's nothing wrong with homemade or sentimental presents - sometimes these are the best kind," Dr Henry said.

"The important thing to remember is that the Christmas period is one of the very few opportunities for families to spend time together during the working year. It's a time for rest and relaxation, a time to enjoy being together. That's the real meaning of Christmas.

"The magic of Christmas is about being kind to ourselves and those we

love."

How to build Christmas resilience:

- Find a balance between meeting expectations and getting what you want - "let go" of perfect and Disney.
- Start new Christmas traditions with connection as a focus - family, friends, self, others in need. Consider volunteering (Volunteers Australia or local acts of kindness).
- As far as possible, maintain stress management, sleep routines, eating well, exercise etc.
- Remember that others may be stressed too, so be patient and tolerant. Acknowledge emotion, listen for underlying meaning, be prepared to make some concessions and try not to personalise too much.
- Decide purchases before hitting the shops, to avoid impulse buying. Consider homemade gifts (eg baking, cards, jams, vouchers for your labour), but remember also to "budget" your time.
- Consider that others might be relieved for you to take the lead in setting limits on expectations.
- Learn to say "no" - you don't have to attend everything you're invited to, be the life of the party or to stay till stumps.
- Allow extra time for contingencies and delegate to others.

Christmas stress triggers:

- Family - Increased contact with family can lead to conflict, tension, pressure. Moreover, because we might expect this contact to resemble a Disney movie, our sense of disappointment or upset over tensions may be heightened.
- Split families and in-laws - We may feel pressure to please everyone, spread ourselves around fairly, manage sensitivities

and coordinate lavish gatherings (as seen on Pinterest).

- Religious matters - Our values may be challenged by perceived obligations and expectations and tensions may arise around ideological clashes.
- Financial pressure - Buying for large families can be expensive, and there is social and media pressure to spend more each year or feel guilty. The costs of social events and catering can all cast a [financial burden](#).
- Grief - The reminder of absent friends, our first Christmas without someone special or since a major change or event, can leave a sense of loneliness and grief that we may feel we can't share.
- Loneliness - Separation and/or isolation can lead us to feel lonely and like 'Christmas failures'.
- Triggers -Upsetting memories related to Christmas or childhood, brought on by the season or what/who it brings back into your life can unsettle us and may even trigger episodes of mental illness.
- Having to be jolly - On top of all the above, the pressure to put on a happy face and be jovial can lead to a sense of leading a double life in which no one really 'knows us'.
- Overeating and drinking - these can lead to weight gain, embarrassing displays, injuries etc.
- Busy schedules of events - There is a danger of feeling exhausted and then having to return to work.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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