

Coping with stress from others during the holidays

December 14 2015, by Sarah Feuerbacher

For many of us, the holiday season can give rise to extra stress. We may feel the weight of hectic schedules, financial strain and more people crammed into less space. Some may strive for an unrealistic ideal of holiday happiness and feel the stress of falling short. Tragic national and global events may cast a shadow, and we may be unnerved by warnings to exercise caution during this busy travel season.

However, it is possible to cope with [stress](#) and focus on enjoying the sights, sounds, and yes, even travel of the holidays.

Consider this equation:

Define the stressor + use your strengths + find resources = reducing stress and crises.

In other words, start with defining stress appropriately. Stressors are the external events that leave us feeling helpless and out of control. Stress is our body's physical or emotional reaction to the stressor, which means we can have control over how we respond. We can use the equation to learn to respond with a positive response rather than a negative response.

First, define the real stressor.

What is it that is actually worrying you? Are you afraid something like the Paris attacks will happen when you travel to Kansas to visit family, or did the attacks remind you that there are elements of evil in the

world? If so, it's helpful to put this stressor in perspective and consider the good that you experience every day.

Start at the beginning of your day and count the number of kind acts you encountered. Perhaps someone opened a door for you, or said a kind word, or the driver in front of you at Starbucks paid for your drink. Reflect on the many kind acts you've experienced over your lifetime, and ask yourself whether you are more likely to encounter safety, goodness and a pleasant trip, as opposed to a dangerous situation. Appropriately defining the stressor de-escalates our helpless feelings and increases our sense of control over our situation.

Second, tap into your internal strengths.

Everyone possesses strengths, and one way to find those is to recall a time that was stressful and consider how you were able to make it through and be resilient. When have you felt scared, and how did you survive it? Your answer may include using a particular skill set, prioritizing needs over wishes, adopting a realistic timeline, applying humor to the situation, setting appropriate boundaries, or changing your negative self-defeating talk to "positive self talk." This last technique is easy to apply by adopting a motto you can quickly call upon when you feel stress begin to arise:

- My stress is a signal. I need to pause and relax.
- I'm the only person who can make me stressed or keep me calm.
- Nothing says I have to be confident and strong all the time. It's OK if I feel unsure or confused.
- It is impossible to control other people and situations. The only thing I can control is myself and how I express my feelings.

Visualize your trip or holiday gathering in detail as a successful event, while at the same time applying your personal strengths. You will have

more control over the situation as well as your emotions.

Third, find and use resources.

Since everyone has experienced feeling stressed, use that as permission to ask for help from your support system. Approach a partner, relative, trusted friend or colleague, and let that person know you value his or her support. Here is one way to ask for help: "I trust you to be able to tell you that I have been feeling stressed recently. I would like to allow myself some time for self-care and was wondering if you may be willing to help me do that." Clearly explain the help you're seeking, such as an afternoon of child care or a referral for a counselor, and offer to reciprocate when that person is in a time of need.

Sometimes the hardest part is asking for help. However, doing so means you care about yourself, and your bravery may inspire others to also seek support. If you need help beyond what your support system can provide, remember that resources in North Texas include professional counselors and case managers, shelters and housing assistance, food pantries, clothing closets, [health care professionals](#) and legal advocacy assistance.

Finally, even on the busiest days, all of us can find a few moments to use our inner resources and practice a simple de-escalating technique called a relaxation exercise. First, close your eyes and clear your mind. Form a calming mental impression using all of your senses, such as walking on a beach, hearing the ocean, feeling the sand and breathing in the fresh, salty air. Breathe deeply into your abdomen and say to yourself, "Breathe in relaxation." Become aware of any tension in your body. Breathe out from your abdomen and say to yourself, "Breathe out tension." Use each exhalation as an opportunity to let go of tension. Practice this exercise when you wake, fall asleep and anytime you need a break during the day.

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