Surviving Holiday Stress: A Simple Guide for Families

Of course the holidays are hectic & stressful! But once all the ornaments are put away, making the transition back to the regular routines can be equally challenging – especially for children who struggle with emotional or behavioral challenges or have a communications disorder, such as autism. Here are some simple tips to help make the New Year brighter and smoother for everyone in your family.

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5 Tips to Help Children Cope with Holiday Stress

1. **Try to avoid rushing and be more flexible.** The holidays will happen even if you don’t get everything on that long to-do list completed. So focus on doing the things that can create positive memories of the holidays for both you and your child.  
   **What you can do:** Let your child help as appropriate with the holiday baking, even if it takes longer than usual and means you can only get three kinds of cookies made instead of your usual 10. Don’t try to cram in three errands beforehand so you and your child have to rush in just before the start of the holiday show at the mall. Build in some time each day to take a deep breath and relax – it’s important for you and your child, and it also helps with the after-holiday transition back to the normal, and often less hectic, schedule.

2. **Discuss holiday expectations ahead of time.** Does grandma shower everyone with kisses when she arrives, but your child is uncomfortable with lots of physical contact? What challenges do long car trips cause? Is your child sensitive to noise, lights, lots of activity or meeting new people?  
   **What you can do:** Decide with your child on a way of greeting that’s comfortable for her, and make sure the relatives understand this ahead of time and agree to follow protocol. Plan ahead with the child some ways she can calm herself during a car trip or build in extra travel time for multiple out-of-the-car breaks to expend energy or re-focus. Don’t overload your child’s senses; it’s okay to turn off the holiday music or the tree occasionally. Know when your child is nearing his limit and how to help him calm down before he’s out of control. Build in quiet time after a noisy activity or when lots of people will be at the house.

3. **Keep routines as much as possible.** Bedtimes, meals and other routine activities often get pushed aside during holidays, but they’re important touchpoints for everyone in the family. Sleep-deprived adults and children both are quicker to become upset. Holiday treats shouldn’t replace regular meals.  
   **What you can do:** Holiday goodies can play havoc with your child’s nutrition and behavior, especially if she has special dietary needs. Bring nutritionally appropriate non-refrigerated food with you if visiting someone’s home. Consider serving quick, healthy snacks if you have to skip a meal. Build in naps – for adults and children – when normal bedtimes must be missed. Engage your child in creating “new” short-term morning and bedtime routines. Create excitement about resuming an activity your child really loves to do once the holiday is over.

4. **Pay attention to changes in the child’s mood before a meltdown happens.** During the holidays we all miss loved ones, especially those from whom we’re separated due to divorce, moving or other reasons, or those who’ve passed away. Children can have a hard time processing those feelings and may be anxious or react to their sadness with negative or aggressive behaviors. Once holiday hustle and bustle ends, a child may focus even more attention on those feelings.  
   **What you can do:** Include appropriate age-level discussions about absent relatives or friends as you wind down from the holidays. Celebrate the positive memories of those people. Involve the child in an activity, like drawing, that allows him to acknowledge how that person is special to him. Try not to ask a lot of questions, but do encourage the child to talk about whatever she feels is most important.

5. **Take care of your family’s health.** “It’ll wait until the holidays are over” is the wrong approach to your health. So we often push aside regular exercise, doctors’ appointments or therapy only to have a full-blown crisis develop as the new year rolls in.  
   **What you can do:** Your family’s medical and behavioral health providers may be taking time off to be with their own families, so be sure you have enough of any necessary prescription medication to last into the new year. Keep up with healthy movement or some type of exercise – it’s a good holiday stress-reliever. Consider starting a family walk or dance party routine a couple of times a week that can continued into the new year. Be alert for signs of depression, anxiety or behavioral outbursts in yourself or your child, and know ahead of time what you’ll do or who you’ll call. It’s important to maintain routine therapy appointments when possible, and don’t be reluctant to contact a medical/mental health provider if you need support.

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