

Given our country's economic woes, the holidays have the potential to create additional challenges this year. Few people seem to have extra resources to spend on gifts, parties and extravagances. Families are cutting back, employees are worrying about job security, and seniors are concerned about their retirement. In an online poll conducted this summer on stress, the American Psychological Association (APA) found that nearly three-quarters of Americans say they experience stress at levels that exceed what they define as healthy.

“It is normal to feel overwhelmed during the holiday season. The pressure to have the perfect holiday can be extraordinary,” says Dr. Katherine Nordal, executive director for professional practice at APA. “It is important to put things in perspective and realize that the materialism of the holidays isn't the real spirit of the season. The holidays are about family and togetherness, not tinsel and presents.”

Stress from the ailing economy and the increasing costs of gas, housing and healthcare can leave you especially vulnerable to increased anxiety during the holidays. However, it is important to view the current economic situation as an opportunity to enhance your psychological well-being. Remember, there are conscious steps you can take to prevent holiday stress and ensure a worry-free season.

APA offers the following tips:

1. Take time for yourself – There may be pressure to be everything to everyone. Remember that you're only one person and can only accomplish certain things. Sometimes self-care is the best thing you can do—others will benefit when you're stress-free. Go for a long walk, get a massage or take time out to listen to your favorite music or read a new book. All of us need some time to recharge our batteries—by slowing down you will actually have more energy to accomplish your goals.

2. Volunteer – Many charitable organizations are also suffering due to the economic downturn. Find a local charity, such as a soup kitchen or a shelter where you and your family can volunteer. Also, participating in a giving tree or an adopt-a-family program, and helping those who are living in true poverty may help you put your own economic struggles in perspective.

3. Have realistic expectations – No Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanza, or other holiday celebration is perfect; view inevitable missteps as opportunities to demonstrate flexibility and resilience. A lopsided tree or a burned brisket won't ruin your holiday; rather, it will create a family memory. If your children's wish list is outside your budget, talk to them about the family's finances this year and remind them that the holidays aren't about expensive gifts.

4. Remember what's important – The barrage of holiday advertising can make you forget what the holiday season is really about. When your holiday expense list is running longer than your monthly budget, scale back and remind yourself that what makes a great celebration is family, not store-bought presents, elaborate decorations or gourmet food.

5. Seek support – Talk about your anxiety with your friends and family. Getting things out in the open can help you navigate your feelings and work toward a solution for your stress. If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consider seeing a professional such as a psychologist to help you manage your holiday stress.

Learn more on [talking to your children about the economy](#).

Special thanks to Dr. David Palmiter for his help with this article

Updated December 2010

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