

Christmas: Get a grip on it!

The holidays! Turkey, fudge, eggnog, tinsel, blinking lights, jingling bells, pagants, parties, shopping, gift wrapping, in-laws . . . it's enough to make you sick, literally. And that explains the influx of patients into doctors' offices right after the first of the year.

Some will argue that the yuletide season shines with hope, faith, peace and goodwill. But for many people the holidays mean loneliness, financial problems, family conflicts, overindulgence, stress and exhaustion. The problem behind Christmas as we know it today is that Christmas is about expectations, and where you have expectations, you have the potential for disappointment.

Donna Sutter, M.D., M.P.H., a psychiatrist at Sisters of Charity-St. Joseph in downtown Houston, says that resetting expectations represents the key to sailing through the season. Every year, she sees many holiday-distressed patients right after the new year, and she's identified the "hot keys" that create incendiary issues during the "season to be jolly."

CHRISTMAS ALONE

"Separation issues are at the top of the list," she says. "Christmas can be painful for divorced parents separated from their children, people who live alone and have no close family, and those who have lost a loved one since the last Christmas. Again, many people feel pressured to live up to the Norman Rockwell kind of Christmas, 12 people saying grace over a roast turkey. You can change your think-

ing on this."

The cure? If you're alone for the holidays, you could volunteer your time and energy to local holiday projects, or you could get together with others who are alone and create new "families." And if this is your first Christmas without that special loved one, Dr. Sutter suggests the "Geographical Cure."

"Take a trip to Cancun, or anywhere," she says. "I often tell my patients to try this, and I always caution them that it may not work, but it usually does."

PREDICT AND PLAN

Dr. Sutter also recommends a cognitive-behavioral approach to managing Christmas. If you can predict what might affect you, then you can prevent it. Again, it's about resetting expectations. Example: If your mother-in-law always expects everyone to have Christmas dinner at her home and it's a miserable experience for you, break the pattern.

"You can't possibly make everyone happy," Dr. Sutter says. "Someone will be disappointed, usually someone who is very rigid, controlling, and set in their ways. Interestingly enough, many dysfunctional families always spend holidays together. But in functional families where members respect each other's wants and needs, holiday activities aren't mandated. They're chosen. Keep that in mind, and let go of the guilt."

STRESS BUSTERS

Dr. Sutter suggests we also pay attention to that common demon

that wreaks havoc with us all year round, but more so during the holidays.

"Stress is a real problem," she says. "Even though Christmas is a time for giving, some of us give too much of ourselves, and then we pay the price with anxiety, exhaustion, and full-blown panic attacks." Surprisingly, most of Dr. Sutter's patients with post-holiday trauma are women. Christmas has long been tied to home-baked goodies made from scratch, handwritten greeting cards, family dinners—all of which historically fell within the responsibility of the "lady of the house." And when one partner is expected to do all of the work, can it really be a time of joy and a time of cheer?

"Get your spouse involved," Dr. Sutter suggests. "Share the responsibility. When you do this, you'll have to give up some control, and lower your standards for perfection. Delegate, plan time for yourself, and when the school calls and wants 30 sandwiches for a teachers' luncheon, tell them you'll get back to them. Think it through, and get back to them after you've really examined your schedule and your other obligations."

Dr. Sutter says you can meet Christmas on your own terms.

"Know yourself," she says. "If you're very, very organized you can do more. If you're not, plan on doing less. Make a list. Like Santa Claus, check it at least twice."

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