

Resetting Your Holiday Expectations



We're well into December, and holiday stress is mounting. Take a moment to reset your expectations for a happier holiday season.

While the holidays are still magical for children and some truly embrace the spirit of the season, most people find the holiday season just adds stress to their already busy life routine. Common concerns include worry about paying for gifts, finding time for all the extra festive activities, and for some, just trying to seem happy for the next month or two when they really just feel overwhelmed and tired. If that is how you feel, just know that you are not a Scrooge. In fact, you are very normal and very much in the majority. In fact, research suggests that the *pressure to be happy* can actually lead to sadness and even depression during the holidays.

With this in mind, take the time to reset the holiday expectations meter for yourself and your family. Consider these seven tips to creating a happier holiday.

1. **Don't idealize the holidays.** Real life is not a Norman Rockwell painting. The more you try to live up to that kind of expectation, the more frustrated, disappointed and unhappy you are likely to be with yourself and others.
2. **Accept people for who they are.** Before being with family and friends this season, take a few moments and acknowledge what you wish they were like and how you would like them to act. Now, let that image go. Expecting others to be anything but themselves is unrealistic and will mostly likely increase stress.
3. **Recreate traditions.** Traditions are wonderful ways to create memories and bring families close together, but traditions also often need to change over time. Take time to discuss your favorite traditions, and then plan only those traditions that best fit your current life circumstances and bring you joy.
4. **Set boundaries.** Decide as a family how you will spend your time and money this holiday season. Don't forget to schedule in some "down time" so you don't get

overburdened with activities. Once limits have been set, you might discover that holiday activities and time with extended family become much more enjoyable.

5. **Take care of yourself.** It's easy to get out of the habit of exercising, eating healthy and getting enough sleep during the holiday season. Don't take the season off from your workout routine during the holidays. Going to the gym regularly not only helps you burn the excess calories you consume from holiday feasting, it's also a great way to relieve stress and improve self-esteem. Activities involving the whole family can also be a great tradition. In addition to exercise, be sure to take time to relax and rejuvenate so you can stay healthy and keep your spirits high.
6. **Focus on the moment.** Even after setting boundaries, it can be easy to get overwhelmed. Slow down and enjoy where you are in that moment. If you feel tense, take a deep breath and take in what you are experiencing with all of your senses. Take a mental snapshot to create memories for the future. Remember, even the frustrating moments might make you laugh in the future.
7. **Take time to reflect and focus on the positive.** Take some time to think about all of the positive things that have happened in the past year. Reflect on accomplishments, goals you or your family members have achieved or positive changes that have been made – no matter how small. Capture some of these reflections in a journal so you can remember them for years to come. If you want to go above and beyond (no pressure!), send a brief email or letter to share your reflections with loved ones.

This article was written by Naomi Brower, Utah State University Extension professor