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Keep expectations in check for a perfect holiday

The holiday season brings expectations of joy, excitement, happiness, and fulfillment. The media depicts perfect families busily shopping and partying, surrounded by friends, enjoying abundant food and music, and happily opening desired gifts.

For many, however, the magic of the season is lost to sadness and stress.

We all understand that this is the busiest time of the year for the retail, travel, and tourism industries. Few realize that this is also peak season for professionals who care for victims of child abuse and domestic violence, and for those caring for patients with mental health issues.

Pediatricians, psychiatrists, police officers, and social workers can all attest to the increased numbers of battered women and abused children, during the holiday season. Emergency rooms and psychiatric treatment facilities are frequently overwhelmed at this time of year.

Unrealistic expectations of idyllic holiday joys usually fall short of fulfillment, as too many extras get added to already busy and overcommitted daily lives. Suddenly, in addition to daily routines, we have to find time and money for cooking, shopping, parties, family and work commitments, and travel. How can we perform our daily jobs with all the additional tasks we try to take on? How can we afford all the expensive presents we feel compelled to purchase?

For many, this additional drain on energy and income, leads to agitation, stress, and/or depression. While individuals who suffer from underlying emotional problems are at particular risk, we are all vulnerable at this time of year. A dangerous combination of exhaustion and increased alcohol consumption can significantly reduce patience and reasoning skills, putting family members and friends at risk.

Exhausted and confused by the pace of the season and daily routines disrupted by other demands, children may unwittingly add to parental stress. Children's

irritable responses to change and their demands to have expectations met may increase household tensions. In most child abuse cases, a loving parent momentarily loses control and lashes out at a small vulnerable child, often causing serious injury. Domestic violence takes place under similar circumstances.

To ensure a peaceful and satisfying holiday season, we should all take the following steps:

- Take stock of our expectations and make certain they are realistic.
- Limit the add-ons to our daily lives. Set priorities and boundaries, budget our time, and try not to attend every party or event.
- Get adequate rest and limit alcohol consumption. If extra activities cause us to feel overwhelmed, we must modify our schedules and get our lives back under control.
- Set a reasonable budget for presents and stick to it. Avoid incurring debt that causes worry and lost sleep. Do we have to buy presents for everyone on that list? Gifts need not be expensive. Creative, heart felt, presents are often more cherished than those acquired at great expense.
- Set aside time to do things as a family, other than shopping and organized parties. For the well-being of all, we need to maintain scheduled time for routine family activities.

Most importantly, we need to recognize our own feelings and respond to them. Feelings of discomfort or stress should be discussed with family and/or friends. However, if spiraling emotions lead to feelings of lost control, we must seek professional help.

If you are not sure where to turn for help, speak with a close family member, your physician, counselor, or clergy. Don't continue to allow feelings to spin out of control.

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