Tis the Season: Finding Balance during the Holidays

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The holidays mean different things to different people. While for many, the end of one year and the start of another brings good will and personal renewal, for others, the sights and sounds of the season trigger increased stress or serious mood disorders. Moreover, the season of happiness, love, harmony, and peace can be filled with financial hardship, sadness, depression, frustrations, resentment, hostility, and family conflicts.

Like everyone else, nurse anesthetists are susceptible to holiday stress. The holidays aggravate the already busy schedules—operating rooms are short staffed, seasonal flu runs rampant, patients line up for surgery, scheduled C-sections increase, and colleagues go off on holiday vacations. Toss in the steady flow of celebrating, gathering, purchasing, and scrambling to get things done, and the season of good cheer can become burdensome. In fact, the holiday celebration often escalates into the “too much, too many things” categories—too much food, too much alcohol, too much family, and too much spending.

Another source of stress is the disconnection between our expectations for ourselves, what we expect from others, and what we believe others expect from us. This emotional load and the struggle to balance what you value about the holidays with societal pressures to fit in can lead to frustration, anxiety and feelings of seasonal blues. Throw in the economy, inclement weather, and driving or flying long distances, and it's no wonder that we sometimes experience seasonal “blues.”

Environmental factors can also contribute to depression around the holidays. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a serious form of depression that most often occurs during the winter months. Believed to be the result of lack of available sunlight, the disorder is more common in women than men. The symptoms echo those of regular depression such as fatigue, withdrawal, insomnia, weight loss, and mood swings that may lead to suicidal thoughts. Holidays may be more difficult for SAD sufferers. Researchers have found that phototherapy, a treatment involving a few hours of exposure to intense light, is effective in relieving SAD symptoms.

Although many people become depressed during the holiday season, even more experience a post-holiday let down in January, due to emotional issues such as disappointment as well as physical reactions caused by excess fatigue and stress. In spite of what you may have always heard, research has shown that the holidays are not the peak time for suicides. According to a University of Pennsylvania study conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, incidents of suicide tend to occur in the spring and are rare among otherwise healthy individuals.

Dealing with Expectations

Recognizing the need to set limits for the holiday, you must be willing to make changes. First, change the expectations you have for
yourself. Think carefully about your choices. Set realistic goals. Holiday plans that call for extensive shopping, partying until you are exhausted, and staying up late to wrap presents can place unrealistic demands upon your time and stamina. Pace yourself and get enough rest. Do not try to keep up with societal expectations.

Try to find time to exercise during this busy time—even a short walk can help. Park your car farther from the door of the shopping center, take the stairs at work, or walk your dog. Exercise can improve your mental as well as physical condition, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression—as well as staving off those extra pounds. Avoid the pressure to overdo. Watch what you eat and drink—excessive eating and drinking aggravates depression.

Second, change your expectations of others. Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable by not trying to make the holiday “the best ever.” Don’t be disappointed if your holidays are not like they used to be. Each holiday season is different and can be enjoyed. You set yourself up for sadness if everything has to be just like the “good old days.”

Third, change the expectation you think others have for you. Start your own traditions. Choose not to spend time with your family if you have unresolved issues—call and tell them you have other plans. Allow yourself to let go of the past!

Finally, remember that not everyone feels jolly and happy during the holidays, even though we all think we “should.” Our well-being is shaped by our genes, upbringing, personal circumstances and choices. Loneliness is one of a number of dynamic and interrelated forces contributing to holiday blues. The holidays may awaken the dreams, hopes, and longings of childhood, or they may dredge up painful memories of family conflict, loss of loved ones, unresolved resentments, and disappointments. Plan to compensate for feeling sad—do something meaningful to you. Reach out to someone in need. Remember to exercise and get plenty of sleep—a few minutes to clear your head or relax the body can make a difference in how you feel. Seek help from professionals, if your feelings last far after the holidays.

Savor the Season

We often think of well-being as happiness, but it is more than that—it is having meaning in our lives, developing as a person, and feeling worthwhile. The happiest people spend the least amount of time alone according to M. E. Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist and author of Authentic Happiness. Being connected, our relationships to others and the world about us, is heightened during the holiday season. Be kind to yourself and give yourself the gift of attention, understanding, and empathy.

Be child like again. Enjoy the simple pleasures of the sights, sounds, and smells of the season. Smell the scent of pine and spicy apple cider. Savor the tasty treats. Stand quietly in front of the lights—be they in the shape of a star, a tree, a Santa, or a single candle. While rushing around, just take a moment to stop, listen, and touch the season—may you find joyful, peaceful well-being.

The best yuletide decoration is a smile.

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References


Embrace the Spirit of Giving

Doing something for someone else is a tried and true remedy. Spend some time with the less fortunate. Call a supportive friend or family member. Make new friends or contact someone you have lost touch with. Remember those in the military who are stationed far from home. Work with a volunteer group to provide food and gifts for those in need.

Laugh and smile. Research shows that those who can look at things from a lighter perspective handle stress better. Using humor to cope has many benefits. Be sensitive to your colleagues and friends; if you are stressed and irritable, they most likely are too. Be extra considerate in your words, expressions, and actions.