

NEWS FLASH: *HOLIDAYS CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH!*

By Jill Bachman, MSN, RN, CEAP, Education/Outreach Coordinator

Red, green and sparkly decorations appear magically the day after Halloween, signaling a one to two month time period known as “the holidays”. Syrupy television specials and emotional commercials are hard to avoid. Catalogues become mountains in a garage. Visual displays lose their special appeal because they are everywhere. That the holidays should be perceived by so many as stressful is in direct contradiction to what most of us want. So how can we participate in the holidays and keep a sense of sanity at the same time?

The first thing to do is to recognize the *sources* of holiday stress, so we can better anticipate a surprise attack and choose our responses. Sources can be grouped into four categories, psychological, financial, physical and time. Some of the more common psychological factors include emotional intensity, reminders of the loss of loved ones, family conflicts that haven’t been solved by now, and perceiving social events as obligations. The primary financial pressure is the tendency to overspend. Physical factors include shopping, baking, entertaining, increased eating, drinking and a lack of exercise. And finally, most of these activities interact to create unusual time demands, which pressure us even further.

General Stress Management Strategies: Stress management strategies are conscious efforts that we can use to control, reduce or interact with various stressors as well as the stress response itself.

□ *Avoid or reduce exposure to stressors*

* It is still possible to say “no” during the holidays. Invitations can be declined; additional gift purchases can be passed by. * Put some television time on hold in favor of other activities, especially the “happily ever after” stories that promulgate the myth of the holidays as a magic cure. Real conflict resolution is rarely achieved in an hour. * Hide. If you need a little break, admit it and seek refuge.

□ *Reinterpret or rethink the meaning of rituals and stressors*

* For people who celebrate the religious aspects of the season, separate the religious observances from the gift giving and social events and enjoy more of the holidays without compromise. * Use this time with children to become media literate and to understand what tactics are being used to market unneeded and expensive items. * The next time you’re in a long line or a traffic jam, remember Q-TIP and quit taking it personally. Use this time to focus on slow, deep breathing instead to decrease the tension. * Instead of expecting everything to go perfectly (or well), adopt the attitude that I’LL MAKE THE BEST OF WHATEVER HAPPENS. * Recognize that friends and family love us in spite of the gifts we give them, not because of it.

□ *Reduce the stress response before it happens*

* Write down your broader priorities for the holiday season, and post them in an obvious place; things like nurturing positive relationships, sharing with people who don’t have the resources you do. * KEEP SOME ROUTINES, ESPECIALLY THE HEALTHY ONES. Recognize that the PERVASIVE and SOCIALLY SANCTIONED use of food and alcohol during the holidays actually increases stress rather than reduces it, and may create additional problems to deal with in the new year. *Anticipate likely problems and delays, and plan for them. * If you are single, widowed, divorced or separated during the holidays, recognize that the although there is a “happy family” myth, you don’t have to accept it, and you have every right to enjoy the holidays in whatever state of relationship you find yourself.

□ *Get rid of the stress response after it happens*

*Laugh a lot. *Exercise vigorously. *Talk stressful events over with friends and a support network. *Write or journal about your feelings and reactions. *Laugh some more. *Hug a child, a friend, care for a pet.

And finally, if none of these other suggestions help, remember that in reality there are only 31 days in December. Start a countdown. Look forward to something in January, like another year and many new possibilities for growth.