

LifeBack Sets the Story Straight on Holiday Stress



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Throughout my years as a therapist, I have noticed certain patterns of anxiety and dread that seem to loom during the holidays. The pumpkins come down, the Halloween candy disappears, and the red carpet of stress rolls out, down every street and through every living room.

The Stigma Debunked

This year, I thought it might be helpful to examine common feelings and thoughts about the holidays and see where we can spark change. If I had a dollar for every time a patient said, “I hate the holidays, they’re so stressful”, I’d be on a beach in Maui sending an obligatory holiday greeting card titled Mele Kalikimaka.

Let’s set the story straight about holiday stress. Where does it come from and what can we do about it? The first thing I tell my patients is this: the holidays DO NOT have to be stressful. I challenge patients to identify the origins of their core beliefs and begin to evaluate unhelpful thought patterns that impact current behaviors. Ask yourself: When did this start? When did the joy of the holidays disappear? When did you start to associate the holidays with stress?

There are many reasons one may feel dread or panic around the holiday season. Often, people do not realize that unresolved experiences from the past impact current feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. It is important to examine your internal dialogue and ensure the story you’re telling yourself is true!

Situations Unresolved

When we finally acknowledge that we’re grappling with unresolved emotions, the journey to change can begin. Therapy can be helpful if you’re struggling to let go of old feelings, particularly anger, resentment, and disappointment. A trained clinician can help you identify specific emotions that have been living rent free in your psyche. You can find the support you need to explore your core beliefs and identify how this system impacts your current functioning.

A Dusty Old Book

Our brains work somewhat like a word processor, constantly recording data and creating an encyclopedia of beliefs from which we form a world view. Often times, we adopt an internal dialogue based on negative feelings or experiences from the past. Ultimately, this impacts how we feel about ourselves, others, and the world around us. Imagine going to the library and, instead of selecting a new, updated book with accurate information, you select an old dusty out-of-print book from a moldy box in the basement.

A New Release

Correcting your personal narrative is like selecting a new book. Stay out of the basement rummage sale and select from the “best seller” shelf. You can learn to dispute your negative beliefs by examining the fear behind maladaptive thinking patterns. You can create new beliefs that are more positive and conducive to happiness and general health.

A New Recipe

Give yourself permission to create the experiences you want. If you didn’t enjoy the loud, chaotic soirées from your childhood, create holidays that feel warm and peaceful. Set the scene: a crackling fire, traditional Christmas carols, and fresh-baked cookies. Orchestrate a small gathering of loved ones exchanging small tokens of appreciation. If your childhood holidays felt boring or sterile, perhaps you crave more eggnog and mistletoe. The more the merrier! Hang a blinking wreath on the door, host a potluck dinner, and plan a fun gift exchange for all your elves!

The Bottom Line

Create the holidays you want and make new traditions and memories. It is never too late to let go of things that no longer serve you. It is ok to do things differently than your mother did. It is ok to tell your in-laws you’re not cooking this year. You can serve a store-bought pie. It is even ok to not celebrate. It is ok to ask for help, and it is ok to go to therapy if you’re having a hard time sorting it all out.

Make a List and Check It Twice

It can be helpful to determine what is most important for your holiday joy. Try not to get tangled in the tinsel of the platitudes we mutter over and over year after year. Truly think about the experiences you want.

What I have discovered and what I hope is helpful to you is the knowledge that it isn’t about the perfect present, nor is it about the mashed potatoes! The joy lies in the little moments—the wonder of a child’s true belief in magic, the twinkle of every blinking light, the uncontrollable fits of laughter when old stories are shared.

The true meaning of the holidays is everywhere; it doesn’t need an invitation. It’s in the sound of every jingle bell and the light of every flickering candle. Make a clear and firm decision that this season will be different. Avoid the universally accepted notion that holidays are stressful. Repeat after me: “I create holidays that that are joyful and filled with love.”

For more words of wisdom or information on how to start your journey of self-exploration, visit www.lifebacknj.com.

LifeBack is a behavioral health agency offering a full range of mental health and psychiatric services in Doylestown and surrounding communities. LifeBack also provides services in Lawrenceville NJ. LifeBack treats children, adolescents, and adults through individual, couples, and family therapy and also offers psychiatric evaluation and medication management.



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