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Don't Worry, Be Natural!

By Joyce Ritchie

Tips to help parents navigate holiday stress

Whatever our beliefs and traditions, the winter holidays are heartfelt and full of promise. Our families will be together and happy; the children will be good and grateful; our partners will be gracious mind readers; we will have enough time and enough money; our spirits will be filled with peace and love.

Or not.

More likely, say the experts, the common holiday experience of adults and children alike will be stress.

For children and young adults, unspoken anxieties can have deadly consequences. Counselors report that this is the time of year when students may be most likely to experience serious crises and to commit or attempt suicide -- with the last day or two before the actual Christmas and winter holiday break being the most crucial time.

For adults, especially parents, navigating the Christmas season and winter holidays, coping with disrupted work and caretaking schedules, and stretching to achieve the ideal images bombarding them from every TV screen and store shelf, on top of already hectic routines, can leave nerves and emotions scattered like so much glitter off a card. In the best case, happy holidays often means managing the magic with a migraine.

But Indiana University South Bend education professors J. Vincent Peterson and Janette Shaw offer some strategies to combat stress and help make the season pleasantly memorable.

"The first key is to be aware and acknowledge what the stressors really are and what this time of year really takes out of a person," said Peterson. Beyond the drain of money, energy and emotions, parents are concerned about the values they are sustaining in their family.

"We must be able to acknowledge that although we cling to the idea that the family will spend the holiday together, everyone will get along and it will be wonderful, with a good dinner and the gifts that everyone wants, it's a rare family that gets together two or three years in a row with the same members present and in the same circumstances" he said. "Rather than a simple time, it's a complex time, especially with the wide spectrum of families we have now.

"Another common denominator is grief. There are so many underlying issues, losses such as the death of a family member, or a pet, or divorce, a job loss, or a move away from friends or family, that affect us," he added. "Our society expects us to grieve quickly, to put on a 'smiley face,' but it's really a process that we need to go through, no matter that it's the holidays."

In our materialistic society, parents or whoever is working in the family work harder and maybe longer to buy what everyone wants. "Communications, which may not have been great before, can be even more difficult," Peterson said. "School is out and the kids are often home alone with a lot of free time. The very resources and facilities usually available to parents for activities for their children are closed," he added.

So what's a parent to do? In this season of hype and hoopla, Peterson suggests BE NATURAL. "It's a simple acronym to remind us that especially at this time of year we have to take care of ourselves if we are going to take care of others," he said. "Breathing deeply, exercise, good nutrition, a positive attitude, time management, remembering to make time to enjoy the uniqueness of our family, relaxation, associations with various support systems, and laughter -- those are key ingredients to keeping healthy and managing stress.

"Stick the word 'no' on the phone if you are susceptible to saying 'yes' to every request for your time," he added. "Remember that what your family and your children really want most is to spend time with you."

A major concern for working parents is keeping older children and teenagers constructively engaged during the holidays and over school breaks when they may be at home unsupervised. Helping them become gainfully employed would be a high priority.

"With older children and teenagers, who are more aware of the hassles the holidays may bring, parents need to watch for signs of withdrawal and depression, and really work to keep the lines of communication open," said Peterson. "But parents need to know that they can and should call for help, to a school counselor before the break or to a community mental health center, as soon as they think a situation may be beyond their ability to handle."

Volunteer activities can provide opportunities for older teenagers who have little money of their own but great resources in time and energy, which they want to use as contributors to the holiday spirit. Most teens will need an adult to help coordinate their efforts, so parents might network to help connect teens with nursing homes, homeless shelters, and other charitable organizations which need assistance, and provide car pool transportation if necessary.

Shaw pointed out that affirming messages could help keep connections between busy parents and younger teens. "Affirmations might play off the 'Twelve Days of Christmas' or the daily celebrations of Kwanzaa or Hanukkah," she said. "For example, the parent might leave a message in a special trinket that says 'I am busy and I am doing things for you, so I appreciate that you are carrying out your responsibilities,' or, 'Enclosed is a shiny candy that represents the sunshine that reflects my smile when you do a kind act.' Such messages reinforce good, independent behavior."

Another idea is that the teenager could create a project with a different element for each day. For younger children, Shaw suggested that parents develop peer groups and work out a networking support system in the neighborhood, through the workplace or church for quality day care and activities suitable for their ages. "Taking turns with neighbors or work colleagues to provide day care or to take children on an outing can help a working parent who can only take off a day or two during the holiday school break," she noted. Visits to children's museums, story hours at bookstores or at the local YWCA or YMCA, or activities offered by craft shops provide new surroundings and engage children's imaginations.

Even though young children are still deep into the fantasy of the season and believe in the possibilities of what might happen, they are not immune to stress.

"Young children especially need to get out of the house or apartment for regular full-body exercise to work off stress," said Shaw.

Parents can avoid too much time with TV and video games by getting children started in a hobby, particularly something that they may need help with initially but can fall back on by themselves so that it becomes their own creation. "Children are stressed because they have no control," Shaw said. "They see Mom going haywire and all kinds of activity going on, and they are often dragged along on shopping expeditions or taken to events over which they have no control.

"I also would say to avoid sugar, of course," she said, "but that wouldn't work for me, so why would I expect it to work for kids? It's the holidays, after all."

BE NATURAL: The key to surviving the holiday season

B -- Breathe deeply, it will help increase energy levels.

E -- Exercise: 20 minutes, three times a week - and running from errand to errand doesn't count!

N -- Nutrition: Three well-balanced meals each day.

A -- Attitude: Negative attitudes are contagious and destructive. Try to see the glass half full.

T -- Time management: Set priorities and don't take on more than you can handle.

U -- Uniqueness: Recognize and treasure your own uniqueness. Say 'no' when necessary.

R -- Relaxation: Private time to read or listen to music - a time not to focus on the next item to do.

A -- Associations: Maintain contact with nurturing support systems -- colleagues, friends, and family.

L -- Laughter: Still the best medicine.

