

Relieving Holiday Stress

As the expectations of the holiday season descend—beginning earlier each year—so too does stress, anxiety, and impatience in our families. There are stages by which we can reduce the stress. It's a cumulative process. The most important step is the desire to change.

Stage #1 - Just becoming aware of how stress affects our relationships with our children and partners, not to mention our own mental health, is a step in the right direction. Sometimes a drastic occurrence is necessary before we are willing to change. A well educated, normal functioning mom, who has struggled with her "spirited" son for 7 years, found herself in her daily struggle to get out the door on time pinning him to the floor and yelling, "I will not allow you to destroy this family." That was her breaking point. She heard herself and knew she needed help.

Listen to yourself. Are you saying words that upset and shock you and your child in an attempt to get him to do what you want? How do your words and emotions create stress in your family?

Stage #2 - Own your feelings. Squelching feelings while continuing to seethe inside doesn't help anything. And dumping your feelings on your child and shaming him is not the way to go. Parents often say, "But it feels so good to release that anger and just yell." When you know you are about release your emotions, start with the word "I." "I am so angry about all these toys all over the place," is better than, "How many times have I told you to pick up your toys. You never listen to me and now you're going to lose them." Starting with "I" gives you someplace to go and your child is *more likely* to hear you. But the ultimate goal is not to let it get to you—to reduce the stress.

Stage #3 - Stop, leave and breathe. Your automatic emotional reaction is not productive in any way, other than that release. If you can, the next stage is to leave the situation—either mentally or physically—and dissolve your emotions. When that adrenaline rushes, our minds and bodies disconnect. To balance them, put your mind on your breath. Focus on inhaling and exhaling. Say to yourself, "I'm breathing in, I'm breathing out" at least 3 times. It will help clear your head of emotion so you can think. Whenever you feel stressed or anxious, put full attention on your breath. It may seem silly but it can instantly change your perception.

Stage #4 - Become aware of your expectations. Are you expecting your child to comply with your agenda, to listen to you and do what you say—cheerfully? In other words, are you setting yourself and your child up for failure? Set your expectations for success. This is longer range learning and requires understanding your child's temperament, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses to know what expectations are realistic. High expectations are important, but only if they fit your child so she is able to meet them. When you find yourself getting frustrated and impatient with your child and angry with yourself for not knowing how to raise her, it means your expectations are off. When they are appropriate, your child will meet them successfully. Then you can slowly raise the bar.

Do you set expectations on yourself that lead to frustration? The hardest thing to do is to give yourself a break and let go. We are too afraid of "giving in" to let go. How

and when to let go—to not take everything so personally and not be attached to how it works out—is the highest goal we can have. The process of getting there, is with us forever.

Here is a mindfulness exercise to try this month with your children to create some positive and relaxing energy. Plan for at least 15 minutes to focus on each child. I say plan it, because most of the time this happens when your child demands it and you reluctantly give it, thinking all the while about what you should be doing, the phone call you forgot, the things that never get done, etc. Allot this time for 100% of your attention. When you find your thoughts drifting, just bring them back. If the activity you are doing is boring, put your focus on your child and ask:

“What is my child seeing right now?”

“What is he hearing?”

“What is she thinking about?”

“How is he feeling in this moment?”

Take these few minutes to see and hear the world from behind your child’s eyes and ears. Put yourself in his mind. What your child will receive is the knowledge that he is important to you, that you care about his world.

Our children pick up on our energy. When your child is behaving in a way that is stressful to you, ask yourself how you are doing. Is she mirroring your energy? When you are stressed, impatient, depressed, angry or critical, that is the energy your child gets and what she reacts to. Breathe, bring your attention fully present on the moment and see if you can calm yourself. There is a good chance that it will have an affect on your child—the rest of the family as well.