

Andrea Weiss, Ph.D. writes:

Why are the holidays such a difficult time for some of us? Our children can hardly wait for the special celebrations and the excitement that comes in December. Yet often, we are burdened by the pressures we feel with the approach of this festive season.

Is it the setting up of expectations and the great disappointment in ourselves if these expectations are not met that create a great deal of stress over the holidays? For some of us, the holidays remind us of cherished moments in our childhood. We carry around memories of life's sweetness and bountifulness and a feeling of closeness to other people. Then, in the present, the holidays become the task of recreating these lost memories and moments. Especially if our life is more difficult than these memories, the strain on us can be immense. For others of us, if our childhood was difficult, where the holidays only exaggerated life's ongoing struggle, the holidays can bring back painful memories.

Women especially will carry around idealized memories of their mothers at this holiday time. They remember that their house was a beautiful place and that their mothers effortlessly provided warmth and serenity at this time. In an effort to recreate what their mothers gave them, some women can feel that their own strain and worry around the holidays only exaggerates what they have lost. Our modern day ideals in advertisements and on television, like Martha Stewart speaking to the comfort and ease of this festive time, can make us feel that when our reality, with its less than perfect aspects, is part of the holiday, we have failed.

Psychologically, we have as a part of our personality, ideals that we strive to meet. These ideals are formed in part from our identifications with our parents and other important persons, and they influence our own goals. In what is commonly called our superego, we either reward or punish ourselves for how well we have lived up to our ideals. When we fail to live up to our ideal, we tend to feel guilty and self-punitive. This dynamic can be the cause of some of the holiday stress and depression.

Considering that these dynamics operate, we should think about what we'd like the holiday to mean to us and our children. What most people remember about their holiday celebrations is their family and warmth they experienced. Setting this experience as a priority can help deflect some of the holiday strains. Then, quantity of presents is never as important as the fun of being together. Family rituals become important. Holiday events become things you feel you can live up to. Outings with children, to the beach, on a hike, become a central part of the celebration. Making gifts and foods become part of the holiday itself. A simple craft on the special day or pictures taken of every state of the holiday become the living memories of wonderful time spent together.

Be good to yourself. With so much going out, and so little coming in, give yourself a present. Eat well. Exercise. Take a little break and talk with yourself about what your concerns are.