



How to Be Thankful This Thanksgiving

It's 11 a.m., the turkey is still frozen, the in-laws are pulling into the driveway and you still haven't set the table. Is this what Thanksgiving is all about? If you're feeling the pressure to have everything just right, take a few minutes to read over the following tips that will (we hope) help put the "happy" back into the holidays.

PLAN -- BUT NOT TOO MUCH

"I think part of the problem with holiday stress is when the holidays are really blown out of proportion and people start preparing for them so far in advance," says Carol Goldberg, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and president of Getting Ahead Programs, a New York-based corporation that conducts workshops on wellness and stress management. "Advance preparation is nice, but it shouldn't take over your whole life. You shouldn't be so focused that afterward you're going to feel somewhat let down because the celebration didn't match your expectations."

PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE

"I think it's important to put the holidays into perspective," says Dr. Goldberg. "Be realistic. I mentioned that preparation shouldn't be such that it takes over everything, but you should be prepared." She suggests making lists -- a different one for each event, celebrations and gifts. "That's another thing you can do so you won't feel overwhelmed, and that will reduce your level of stress," she says.

SHARE THE WORK

If you have people coming over for dinner or a celebration and they offer to bring something, let them, recommends Dr. Goldberg. "You'll have less stress and people will feel that they're doing something worthwhile and useful," she says.

She adds that there's nothing wrong with buying some of the food, if you can afford it, or considering a caterer. "Today, lifestyles are much more pressured than they were years ago. We shouldn't try to replicate the kind of celebration we grew up with," says Dr. Goldberg.

Being the host or hostess during the holidays can be a stressful role. Dr. Goldberg suggests sharing preparation and cleanup with others. "Hiring help if you can afford it can make celebrations less stressful. Otherwise, if guests ask how they can help, see if a few could arrive earlier to help set the table or stay afterwards to help with the cleanup," she says. "It's very hard to get up the next day to a dirty kitchen with all kinds of food already caked on. Let them know in advance so they can set their schedule accordingly."

START NEW TRADITIONS

"Ask the people coming to your celebration what they really want to do," says Dr. Goldberg. "It's very possible they don't want to come and get stuffed with lots of calories. They might not even want to have turkey -- they may want to have some ethnic food, like Chinese. There's nothing that says it has to be turkey."

Although Dr. Goldberg says there is something to be said for tradition, not everyone wants the same kind of celebration. "Some people might not want to stay home, they might want to go to a restaurant, and there's nothing wrong with that," she says. "They may not want to sit at home and watch football games, they may want to watch something else or do something else."

TRAVEL WISELY

Most everyone wants to go home for Thanksgiving, and most everyone chooses the same day to do it -- the day before the holiday. Dr. Goldberg suggests leaving on Tuesday and returning on Saturday to avoid the Wednesday through Sunday crowds. "You may even be able to save some money," she says.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

"Another thing which people today find very stressful, because there are so many divorces, is the reconstituted family structure," says Dr. Goldberg. "Holiday time tends to be family time, so people who are divorced have to face ex-in-laws and ex-spouses, and that can be very difficult." If you're divorced or separated, and your children are splitting the holiday between both parents' homes, make arrangements to pick up or drop them off at a neutral location, says Dr. Goldberg.

When it comes to conflicts with parents or siblings, Dr. Goldberg says to keep in mind it's only for a few days. "It'll be over soon," she says. "If you see the time as limited, it's easier to take."

Holidays can be difficult times when a close friend or family member has passed away. Setting aside some time to talk about the deceased person and share memories of them is one way of coping. "But move on," says Dr. Goldberg. "Spend maybe a half-hour discussing this person and then stop that conversation and go on to the rest of the celebration."

IF YOU'RE ALONE

Holidays are also difficult for people who are alone. "If people are single or far from their families, they could celebrate with friends. Friends are often a substitute for family," says Dr. Goldberg. If you know several other people who are also alone, put together a group and share the holiday together.

"Another thing I think is nice is to volunteer for part of the day in a hospital or soup kitchen, because you're doing something worthwhile, and you're probably not going to feel as sorry for yourself when you see people who are worse off than you," she says.

EXERCISE AWAY YOUR STRESS

"Exercise is a physical outlet for emotional stress," says Richard Cotton, an exercise physiologist and former spokesman for the American Council on Exercise. "It's a form of release."

Although there isn't one type of exercise that's right for everyone, Mr. Cotton says that keeping your body in shape or keeping some level of conditioning can be beneficial when it comes to managing stress. "It's physical movement to help resolve the distresses that are building within," he says. "When we keep ourselves in shape, we're more tuned up and we feel better, and when we feel better, we're more able to cope with the stresses of the holidays."

As with other aspects of the holidays, planning is important with exercise, too. "Preparing the mind can help enormously," says Mr. Cotton. He warns, however, against making stress-relieving exercises a stress in themselves. "Figure out what's realistic, when you can and can't exercise, and do your best to stick with that," he says. "Avoid making the guilt of not exercising an additional stress. Plan and make realistic expectations of yourself. It can certainly make a huge difference."