

Holidays got you down?



Tips for making the holiday season less stressful and more joyful

by Shara Rutberg

Last Christmas, one of the most meaningful holiday gifts Elissa Dickey received was one she gave herself: permission to not send Christmas cards. “Not a single card,” says Dickey, 43, who lives with multiple sclerosis.

As a way to cut down on holiday-related stress, she opted to skip sending the 30 cards she usually mails to friends and family. Instead, she posted a photo of her family and a message on Facebook. “It turned out to be a great idea,” she says. “I loved going through all the messages people posted in response and then ‘liking’ their posts.”

Cutting out the cards gave Dickey “one less stressor to worry about,” says the author and mother of three, who also works full-time in the communications department at a college in Aberdeen, South Dakota.

Read on for more tips on how to make time around the holidays less of a bulging box of stress and exhaustion for people living with MS and more of a time that might even be — dare we say — enjoyable.

The 4 Ps

Gretchen Shibl, PsyD, a clinical psychologist in private practice in California, suggests using the “four Ps” of coping to manage holiday stress: prioritize, plan, pace and peace.

Prioritize

Megan Weigel, an MS-certified nurse practitioner specializing in neurological care in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, refers to the spoon metaphor for managing energy when thinking about the holidays. That idea, created by Christine Miserandino, holds that people living with MS start each day with a limited number of “spoons” of energy to use strategically. When the spoons are used up, there is no more mental or physical fuel. Use too many spoons one day and you may start the next day with fewer spoons.



Reduce holiday stress by prioritizing the elements that are important to you, then adjust them to your energy level. Photo by Tracy Dorr

The holidays are packed with opportunities to use up your spoons at once, says Weigel, who brings an integrative medicine and holistic nursing perspective to her practice. She suggests deciding which holiday-related activities are things you feel like you have to do (or things you typically do just to please others) and which are things you actually like to do to help prioritize your holiday schedule. Then, use your spoons wisely, and reduce stress and exhaustion.

“Decide, with your family, on your favorite three to five things about the holidays and focus on doing those things and doing them well instead of trying to do the 500 traditions so that you do so you don’t feel guilty,” Weigel says. “Start with those, and the rest can be the icing

on the cake.”

Find out what’s most meaningful, says Deborah Mandelbaum, a clinical social worker in private practice in New Jersey. “For Thanksgiving, for example, some people might say, ‘I really don’t care about the food too much, but I love when we all sit around and watch the football game together.’ Or, ‘We don’t need to use the fancy table linens and dishes. Let’s use paper plates and napkins, so there’s less cleanup at the end of the meal.’ ”

Once you’ve prioritized the holiday elements that are most important to you and your family, adjust them to meet your energy level. Doing so helped Dickey enjoy the holidays more. In addition to moving all those holiday cards from a lingering pile on the kitchen table to a few clicks online, she simplified two other favorite holiday activities.

In past years, she baked dozens of cookies — “at least three different kinds,” she says. Last year, she focused on “traditional sugar cookies, like the ones I grew up with,” and her kids still got to have fun decorating them.

In the past, she’s also fallen into the temptation to “go Griswold” decorating her home and yard. Last year, instead of decking the halls of yet another room in her home, she had her two sons pick out new Christmas ornaments for the tree. She said her kids loved it, and, with Iron Man and a football hanging from the boughs, she had more time and energy to hang out with her family.

Adjusting traditions may require adjusting expectations and creating new traditions, Mandelbaum says. “If you always hosted a big Thanksgiving dinner at 4 p.m., and you know that by then, you don’t have any energy left, change it to noon or 1 p.m.,” she says. Try to approach the gathering as a group project. “Many people like to be involved and don’t just have to be a guest. Ask your guests if they’d like to bring a special dish or dessert or if they could come a little early and help set up or stay and help with the cleanup.”

Buying premade food, hiring cleaning help if possible and delegating more tasks can also help re-invent traditions into more manageable gatherings.

Changing traditions that previously may have seemed set in stone has gotten easier thanks to the pandemic, when most people went without holiday celebrations for two years and learned to visit remotely, Mandelbaum says. “Everybody had to step out of their comfort zone a little.”

The pandemic also revealed things that can make the holidays — and year-round living — easier and helped people appreciate the value in simply spending time together. She points out how much less exhausting it is to place an online order for delivery rather than face the masses in stores. “Especially when you’re feeling fatigued or imbalanced, you don’t want to battle crowds in the stores. Now, there’s a much easier way.”

Other creative adjustments may include using a scooter to shop in crowded box stores when

you usually do not. “This may not be what you’re used to doing but can save time and energy for the things you enjoy and the tasks you need to get done,” says Mandelbaum. Using mobility aids is a great way to do this and to stay safe in crowded places.

And take advantage of people’s newfound video conferencing skills. “Even if not in person, you can still be part of things,” Dickey says. “For example, if you’re not feeling great, you can still video chat with your sister while opening gifts instead of going to her house.”

“You don’t get points for being a hero and being exhausted and not enjoying the day,” Mandelbaum says. “The goal is for you, as well as everybody else, to enjoy it. Let go of perfection and pictures of previous traditions.”

No longer being able to celebrate the holidays in exactly the same way can be difficult. “It becomes symbolic,” Mandelbaum says. “Like, ‘here’s another thing I can no longer do because of MS.’ MS involves a lot of losses. Acknowledging, accepting and grieving those losses is important. Don’t try to pretend that everything is going to be exactly the same, but say, ‘You know what? I can’t do what I did before, where we had 20 people over. Now, we need to just have the immediate family, and everyone goes home by 4.’ What’s important is that the family will be together.”

Try to reframe the situation to focus on the things you can do, she says: Try to see what you can do as a success, not what you can’t do as a failure.

Plan

When you make holiday plans, keep your energy levels in mind — and not the energy you have on a good day, says Shibl, who sits on the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s Mental Health Provider Steering Committee. To be more realistic, “set your expectations about what you can do based on an average day,” she says. “It’s better to set an obtainable goal, and then you can always do more.”

Dickey’s husband, Ted, helps her do this, she says. Her “energy champion,” Ted helps her plan and intervenes when he sees her do too much.

Run a gut check when asked to do more, Weigel advises. “If someone asks you to participate or help them and you feel like you’re going to vomit if you say yes, pay attention to that feeling. When you have that sinking feeling of ‘how can I possibly do one more thing?’ say no before yes gets out of your mouth,” she says. Ask yourself, “really, is anyone going to die if I don’t go to this Christmas party? Is anyone going to die if I don’t go to that Hannukah celebration? Am I better served by a night of rest? Would my family be better off if I were fresh the next day?”

Don’t waste time agonizing over an explanation. “The harsh reality is that most people don’t care why you can’t do something; they just want to know if you will or won’t,” Weigel says. “It’s acceptable to just tell them no.”



Video chatting with family members instead of traveling to each other's homes can make holidays easier. Photo by Tracy Dorr

When it comes to family and friends' expectations, sometimes a longer explanation can be helpful. Jessica Jochum, who lives with MS, lets her host know ahead of time why she may have to duck out early. "Planning ahead, respecting and holding my boundaries with myself and others about what my limits are and discussing expectations with the people who will be involved is important," she says.

She adds that this particularly applies when it comes to her husband, "who is free-spirited and will say yes to anything at any time, which means we can be at parties for hours past what I can handle." She tries to explain to her husband the latest time they can stay that will still allow her to function the next day. "Then, we can both enjoy ourselves because we know exactly what to expect," Jochum says. "It's made such a huge difference in our enjoyment of social functions."

Experts agree that clear communication is key when it comes to managing expectations, especially with the often-invisible symptoms of MS.

Planning — and starting — ahead can take some of the stress out of the holidays. When it comes to cooking, start early and freeze things, Mandelbaum suggests. "If you enjoy baking for your family or shopping, the earlier you start, the less you have to do each day," Weigel

says. “Starting earlier also helps decrease worry.” Waiting until the last minute can turn something you love doing into just one more thing you don’t look forward to about the holidays. “We want to do those things with joy, not with depletion and depression,” she says.

To plan a less-stressful holiday season, take care of predictable things early. For example, make sure your medication refills are up to date and any required tests scheduled, Weigel suggests. If you have issues with symptoms that you’ve been putting off addressing, see your doctor before the holidays begin in earnest.

Pace

“Keeping up with the speed of the holiday season can be exhausting and can exacerbate MS-related fatigue,” Weigel says. “Listen to your body, use your energy wisely and give yourself what you need.”

Maintain your healthy living routine during the holidays, experts say. Some tips for doing so are:

Paying attention to hydration and nutrition. “Dehydration from travel, alcohol and caffeine as a way to stay awake can suck the life right out of you,” Weigel says. Eating healthy does not mean you can’t eat treats during the holidays, just make sure to get in fruits and vegetables, too. Eat healthy foods before a party and be sure not to go to parties hungry, which makes overindulging even more tempting.

Not overusing alcohol. In addition to interacting with medication, alcohol can worsen a lot of MS-related issues. If you are going to drink, Weigel recommends setting a limit ahead of time.

Valuing your sleep. “Having good sleep hygiene and getting restful and restorative sleep is very important for those living with MS. Be consistent. The holidays can sidetrack us in so many ways, including meals, exercise, sleep and self-care,” Shibl says.

If possible, add rest days when you travel, suggests Dickey. “Whenever I can, I try to add an extra day off, knowing that when I get back, I’m going to crash with fatigue,” she says. “Traveling to visit family is exhausting — and that’s true for everyone.”

Peace

A second (or third) piece of pie can be far easier to find during the holidays than a sense of peace. Continue to do the daily things that help you relax, like exercise or meditation. “Take a time-out for yourself,” Shibl suggests. “Increase those self-care activities that help you in the moment to feel more peace.”

“End the year prioritizing your health and happiness instead of being totally depleted — and then having whatever New Year’s resolution you want to make it seem completely

unobtainable,” Weigel adds.

“Keep your sense of humor,” Mandelbaum says. “You know, maybe this year you’ll decide to get a premade turkey and it’s terrible — so try to laugh at it. You just know that you won’t do it again.”

“Be present and enjoy the moment,” Shibl recommends. Whether you’re celebrating Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Lunar New Year or Festivus, “self-kindness and self-compassion are your best gifts for the holidays.”

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