

PTSD and the Holidays: Tips for How to Reduce Your Stress this Season

By Michele Rosenthal

It's that time of year again, when the holidays roll around and what's already tough to deal with — becomes so much tougher! PTSD symptoms can make even the happiest family difficult to be around during the holidays. Today, seven tips about how to make it through, plus advice from survivors keeping it real.

1. - **Stay in the moment; don't think ahead.** Sometimes, just the thought of Thanksgiving dinner, around all those happy people who didn't understand my state of mind, was enough to bring on a surge of anxiety days and even weeks ahead. Keep yourself present TODAY rather than upping the anxiety ante by imagining what some future day will be like. (Actually, this is a good practice year round!)
2. - **Strategize your holidays.** Decide in advance who you want to see, and who you don't; what you will do, and what you won't; where you will go and where you won't. Plan out your activities so that you spend the most time with people who are good for you and minimize contact with everyone else.
3. - **Have an escape plan.** You can't always anticipate how you're going to feel and who's going to say or do what affects you. Have a backup plan so that if you need to make a quick getaway you have an out.
4. - **Incorporate alone time.** In the hustle and bustle of holidays it's helpful to carve out time when you can decompress. Decide in advance when that will be, and stick to it so that you have built in periods of downtime to regroup.
5. - **Do what feels comfortable.** Family and friends can really get going in a whirling dervish of plans and activities during the holiday season. It's okay for you to say, "No!". Pick and choose what you want to participate in and then draw the line. There's nothing wrong with a little boundary setting during this time of year.
6. - **Pace yourself.** If you feel you're getting too caught up and over-committed on the party circuit, slow down. It's better to unmake plans than go through with them and bring on a meltdown. When you feel yourself reaching your limit pull back.

7. – **Maintain your privacy.** Properly managing PTSD during the holidays doesn't require you to explain PTSD to everyone you know. It's all right to decline an invitation without giving a full explanation of why. Certainly, share your reasons with people you trust and love, but for others a simple, "No thank you," is enough.

And one bonus tip: **Do what feels right to you.** In every moment follow your intuition. Your own inner voice knows what you need, and how and when. Listen to it.

In all of the online support groups in which I participate, I asked my fellow PTSDers what their favorite methods were. Here are their Top 7 answers:

I have a visualization that I do of a "safe place" from when I was a kid. I go to the big canopy trees in the woods, look up and see them blowing around with blue sky and sunshine behind them. It calms me. I usually cry, but ultimately I feel saner after.

I make up my mind ... that I want to feel calm and relatively content for the holidays, and then I do nothing that would make that difficult. (It's kind of like that Lynn Grabhorn book, *Excuse Me, Your Life Is Waiting*. It works.) I've cut way back on Christmas frenzy, and no one has complained. The important stuff still gets done and everybody, including me, has good memories.

I don't make commitments to others that I don't want to just to please them. Nowhere is it set in stone that I HAVE to visit so and so...I can do what I want and others will have to cope with my healthy choices....like it or not.

I cut back on what I do for others. I used to make candy, cookies and treats for holiday trays that I would prepare and give to friends & coworkers. This year I haven't done any of it.

The hard part for me will be visiting my parents. That is always hard because they hold Christmas up to be this massive event that has to be "perfect" and trust me dysfunction can't be turned into perfection over night ... so needless to say they're always disappointed. I'm over trying to make their holiday perfect. I'm not going to be responsible for their happiness anymore, it's not my problem. This

year I worked on creating a “shield,” with the help of my therapist, that will help me deflect the pain, hurt and sorrow that they “gift” to me each year.

I usually go into the bathroom (the smaller the room the better) and sit until the feeling passes. I’ve even done this while driving. I’ll pull off the road near the nearest restaurant or something and go into a bathroom stall. I don’t know why it works for me, but it does. And the final tip, a tried and true favorite — whether you live in the country or the city: Long walks.

The crux of getting through holiday stress lies in the choices you make and the actions you take. If you plan ahead and stick to the plan, you can reduce an enormous amount of stress so that you can enjoy the holidays instead of counting the days until they end.