

Is it worth it to battle seasonal stress, or should we just take an aspirin and accept it? Either way, expect some holiday agita.

# Yuletide up in knots



STAFF PHOTO BY TONI CAROLINA/COURTESY OF SQUARE ONE MALL, SAUGUS

Too many gifts, too little time? You may be in need of some holiday stress reduction — if your constitution can handle it.

By Joel Beck

For many, not even the crooning assurances of Andy Williams can make the month of December less stressful.

While the holiday season is indeed supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year," such a positive spin might be a hard sell to anyone who's endured long, stagnant lines at malls and department stores. The kids may be "jingle belling" but there are few who'll be telling you to "be of good cheer" once they've had their Christmas tree tip over or worse, light on fire.

Finally, one might assume that there will be neither "much mistletoeing" nor will "hearts be glowing" as soon as debt and credit card bills

begin to balloon at a rate that is only exceeded by the number of Toys 'R' Us TV commercials aired per hour, geared toward enticing young, impressionable children.

Perhaps such a cynical view of the holidays is unwarranted. After all, a recent Dateline NBC and Prevention Magazine survey showed that 62 percent of those polled still look forward to the holiday season each year. There is evidence to suggest, however, that the idyllic image that normally surrounds the holidays may be a combination of media manipulation and a selective filtering of memories on the part of the general public. Consider these somewhat alarming facts:

- In the same Dateline NBC/Prevention Magazine survey, 41 percent said they find the holidays to be incredibly stressful, ranking the season right up there with other unpleasant tasks such as going to the dentist, asking for a raise and getting a speeding ticket.
- The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, including the office based in Lynn, recently put out a holiday advisory offering stress reduction tips, based on their studies which show that cases of child abuse tend to increase during the holiday season.
- Salem State College Sociology Department Chair Arthur Gould says the time of year which usually brings the highest rate of student depression and suicides falls between the Thanksgiving and New Year's

holidays. Gould also says studies have shown that the holiday season tends to mark the end of many romantic relationships among students, at Salem State anyway.

With so much evidence pointing to the idea that the holidays have rapidly become nothing more than a six-week window of opportunity for ulcers to grow and bank accounts to shrink, one might wonder if it's even possible to begin to reverse the season's stressful effects.

That question would be met by a resounding "yes" from Beverly-based art therapist Allison Manheim, who offers course on the Art of Relaxation as a way to control holiday stress. Using a day-long session, Manheim introduces ways to

use yoga, walking meditation and breath awareness meditation to begin to unravel pent-up holiday anxiety.

"We work on ways of learning different relationships with (stress)," Manheim says. "Not necessarily getting rid of it, but becoming aware of it in a different way. We try to understand more what the source is."

Getting to the source of the stress is also high on the list of priorities of the folks at the MSPCC, but their aforementioned holiday stress reduction tips offer slightly more

down-to-earth methods than that of Manheim.

"Lighten up and enjoy your kids," says MSPCC President and CEO Joyce Strom. "You have to take some time out for yourself to do what you have to do."

"Stress is often catching, meaning that children often pick up on their parents' stress and even magnify it," Strom adds. "Holiday excitement may be overwhelming for children and parents alike, but it can be a pleasant time if parents are sympathetic to children's needs and limitations."

Or here's another suggestion: Move to Australia until Valentine's Day.

**The stress of stress reduction**  
Reading the list of holiday stress reducing tips provided by the MSPCC is actually a stressful experience in and of itself. It seems working to avoid stress could become more stressful than just going

**'Everything you can think of is escalated during the holiday season. Just take any situation you can think of and put the holidays into it. The tension just escalates in every single area. You have to do everything you can to keep the hypertension down by planning ahead.'**

Joyce Strom  
Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children



# The stress of holiday stress reduction

## STRESS, from page 4

about your daily routine.

Activities included on the MSPCC's list are:

- Have a separate Thanksgiving table for younger children if space permits.
- When you feel especially stressed, take some time for yourself. Hire a babysitter, or start a babysitting co-op with other parents.
- Visit malls during off-hours to avoid crowds, noise and long lines.
- Remove your child's coat or sweater inside stores so your child does not get overheated and irritable.
- Plan shopping trips with children only when they are rested and fed.

That's just a partial list of the MSPCC's tips, all of which may seem harmless and helpful enough, but when you factor in those responsibilities along with all the other tasks that go along with the holidays, it's not hard to imagine your internal monologue spinning out of control:

*"I've got to get the spare table set up for the kids but not before I forget to hire a babysitter because I have to get to the mall so I can beat the crowds! Then I have to feed the kids and make sure they have their nap then take off their sweaters so they don't get overheated and irritable and I'm doing all this so I don't get stressed!! AHHHH!!"*

But Strom says that simply planning ahead and taking steps to avoid potential catastrophes need not add to holiday stress. She says being a good manager of one's time and energy will indeed help combat seasonal anxiety.

"Everything you can think of is escalated during the holiday season," Strom says. "Just take any situation you can think of and put the holidays into it. The tension just escalates in every single area. You have to do everything you can to keep the hypertension down by planning ahead. You have to be a good manager of time."

But outside Kohl's department store at Danvers' Liberty Tree Mall on Wednesday — when a one-day sale was doing shoppers the favor of cramming their holiday bargain hunting stress into a single 17-hour period — Strom's suggestions are met with a certain degree of knowing laughter and rolling of eyes by people who know too well that stress may be unavoidable come Christmas time.

"Just don't go shopping," is the facetious response offered by Rowley resident Linda Ryan when asked to share her methods for stress avoidance. Danvers' Jane Nicholson has similarly low expectations about remaining level-headed this time of year.

one-day sale was doing shoppers the favor of cramming their holiday bargain hunting stress into a single 17-hour period — Strom's suggestions are met with a certain degree of knowing laughter and rolling of eyes by people who know too well that stress may be unavoidable come Christmas time.

"Just don't go shopping," is the facetious response offered by Rowley resident Linda Ryan when asked to share her methods for stress avoidance. Danvers' Jane Nicholson has similarly low expectations about remaining level-headed this time of year.

"There's going to be at least a modicum of stress any time you have to spend twice as much money than you're used to," Nicholson says. "That's always going to be a stresser, unless you're independently wealthy, which most of us are not."

But Manheim says the key to avoiding unneeded levels of anxiety stretches beyond just the value of the almighty dollar. She also agrees there may be something to the idea that trying to do too much to avoid stress could be stressful by itself. (*"I've got to get to my Art of Relaxation class so I can stop being so stressed! AHHHH!!"*) She says often people do try to squeeze too much into their schedule simply for the purpose of reducing stress, which is why she says those who come to her relaxation classes will come away with more of a lifestyle change than a way to magically wave away holiday pressures.

"I call the workshop the Art of Relaxation, but that's a little misleading," Manheim says. "People really want to relax, sometimes almost too much. What I do is stress reduction, not relaxation. It's not immediate. You're really re-learning your relationship with stress."

"You have to start somewhere," Manheim continues. "Why not start at the holidays to understand the source of your stress?"

## Don't stay home

If you type the words "holiday stress" into an Internet search engine, you'll be immediately greeted by a bevy of suggestions on how to avoid or relieve such tensions. While money (more

specifically parting with money) appears to be the clear front-runner among reasons people get stressed out at the holidays, not far behind is the idea of having to deal with crowds and swarms of mad, frothing shoppers at the mall.

Naturally, many of the Web sites that turn up on the Internet search recommend online shopping as a simple way to avoid mall-induced holiday stress. Though such methods have seen a decrease in popularity in the last year or two, online shopping remains a guaranteed way to avoid standing in long checkout lines.

And according to Professor Gould, it's also the preferred method of shopping for serial killers and highway snipers.

That isn't to say, Gould explains, that everyone who buys their uncle a shirt online from L.L. Bean this Christmas is going to wind up as a crazed killer. But he does say the key to long-term mental health and eventual stress reduction is to put down the mouse and go stand in a long line once in a while.

"In many ways, (online shopping) alienates us," Gould says. "I can sit at home and go shopping on the Internet and I don't have to interact with any other people. In order for us to have a personality that is reasonably balanced, it requires interaction."

"Even though long lines might be stressful, at least it forces you to have interaction with others," he says.

With that in mind, one might do well to try to heed the advice of Strom, who insists that the best way to avoid holiday stress is simply to put the season in perspective. Of course, based on the evidence at hand, that may be easier said than done.

"You've got to keep focusing on the purpose of the holidays," Strom says. "Just do the things that make the holidays fun."

E-mail reporter Joel Beck at [jbeck@cnc.com](mailto:jbeck@cnc.com).