



## *Give Yourself a Present: More Peaceful Holidays*

While driving to the home of my parents one long-ago Christmas, I complained to my children about my ferocious migraine headache. Eight-year old Michael zeroed in on me with his beady brown eyes, and said, “Mom, how come you always get a headache on Thanksgiving and Christmas?” He was right. I *was* always ill over the holidays. The month before, my headache and I had suffered together in my sister’s bedroom, while the rest of the family made merry and enjoyed a lovely Thanksgiving dinner without me.

It is not uncommon for the holiday season to trigger physical and/or emotional pain. Many people experience sadness, anxiety, even symptoms of depression during the many activities associated with the holidays. For individuals with diagnosed mood disorders, extra care must be taken during the excitement, anxiety, and built-in stresses of the very days for which we use words such as “happy”, “joyous”, and “merry”.\* Like it or not, though, the season to be jolly is fast approaching. If you find yourself dreading the holiday hustle and hassle, here are some steps you can take to make this year less painful, more enjoyable, and to help keep feelings of anxiety and depression at bay.

- **SIMPLIFY YOUR LIFE AS THE HOLIDAYS APPROACH**

Cancel unnecessary appointments. Make as few appointments as possible for the next two months. Any appointments you make should be to treat yourself: a body massage, manicure, pedicure, a visit to your therapist, or something else that feels good. The dentist, the decorator, and clipping the dog’s nails, can wait.

- **KNOW WHEN TO SAY “NO”**

Don’t extend yourself to the point of exhaustion. Consider not hosting a party this year, and pick one or two parties to attend. More than two invitations? “No, thank you” works for me. If you use alcohol, pretend your priest, rabbi, minister, or grandmother is watching you. Alcohol in any form is a central nervous system depressant, and overdoing it can sap your energy for days.

- **DELEGATE, DELEGATE, DELEGATE!**

Choose age-appropriate tasks, and put each of your children in charge of one. Even a five-year old can be in charge of keeping the cat away from the decorations for a few hours. They’ll feel important and you need only supervise (not control). Think “peace, not perfection”. Delegate the local baker to make a few pies, or a delicatessen to provide a veggie or fruit tray to help keep hungry people out of the kitchen before dinner.





- **PLAN FOR “ALONE” TIME EACH DAY.**

I used to put a note on my bedroom door that read “Meditating”, and my children learned to respect that time. Allow yourself to do anything you find restful. Sit in a warm bath, read something inspirational, exercise, take a nap, watch Oprah, listen to music, talk with a friend on the phone, whatever pleases you and makes you feel better afterward. Be adamant about having time alone.

- **BREATHE.**

No, I’m serious. I know you think you breathe all the time, but I promise that most of you hold your breath much more than you know. And you may only use the upper area of your lungs. When you feel anxious, fearful, angry or sad, remind yourself that a few deep, slow breaths will help you to relax. As you breathe, your lower abdomen should move in and out. If only your shoulders and chest are moving, practice breathing more deeply. This allows more oxygen to enter your blood, more toxins to be released, and helps you to feel more relaxed. Notice how often during the day you find your shoulders up near your ears. As you lower them (your shoulders, not your ears), breathe deeply and slowly a few times.

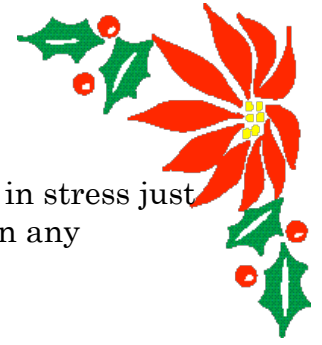
- **USE FOOD AS FUEL.**

I won’t ask you not to eat any of those special holiday treats, but I hope you will eat real food too. Holiday dinners are not usually a problem, since they last only 1 or 2 days. Candies, cookies, and other traditional goodies can be a problem if you are eating them for days before the holiday feast. Eating a piece or two of a sugary morsel when you’re hungry, may take care of the hunger and may even whip you into warp speed for an hour or so. Alas, the sugar levels in your blood will cause heaps of insulin to enter your blood stream (it’s trying to save you from the sugar) that will likely drop your blood sugar (and your energy) like a rock. Satisfy your hunger with a little protein, whole grains, vegetables, or fruit, then have a sweet. You’ll probably eat less sugar, and your blood sugar level will rise gradually, leaving you with more energy for a longer period of time. It’s part of that saying “No” idea.

- **CHOOSE PEACE.**

When situations arise which ordinarily cause you to feel anger, anxiety, sadness, or fear, stop whatever you are doing, take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and say to yourself, “I choose peace”. Remove yourself to a private, quiet place, and repeat to yourself, while breathing deeply and slowly, “I choose peace”. This doesn’t mean you’re giving up anything important. You are only giving up an unpleasant feeling and the effect it will have on





your body and mind. It means you choose not to get caught up in stress just for the moment. This is a powerful exercise that you can use in any situation. Practice makes permanent.

I no longer experience unhappy holidays, thanks to diagnosis and treatment for depression, talk-therapy, and learning the importance of self-care. I'm still human, though, and I still have to practice most of the things I suggest to others. I'm already gearing up for the next two months. Know what I'm thinking about? Peace. And fudge.

\*Some of you will experience suicidal thoughts during this emotional time. If you do, please tell someone, or go to a hospital emergency room right away. If you'd rather, please call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) for help.

**About the Author:** Bev Cobain is the cousin of the late Kurt Cobain, front man for the band Nirvana, who killed himself in 1994, thus becoming the third suicide in Bev's family. She is a psychiatric nurse and author of the acclaimed book, *When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens* (Free Spirit Publishing, Minneapolis, MN, 1998). She is passionately involved in depression identification and suicide prevention, especially for youth, and is a celebrated national speaker and trainer for these issues. Bev may be contacted from her website [www.livingmatters.com](http://www.livingmatters.com) or by email: [bev@livingmatters.com](mailto:bev@livingmatters.com).

