

Managing IBD and Holiday Stress

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November 7,
2019



Last week, I wrote about how I have to be mindful of my eating habits during the holiday season. But managing my food intake is a breeze compared to my No. 1 trigger: stress. Preparing for the holidays can be daunting, but letting go and relaxing is close to impossible for a control freak like me. And that puts my health at risk.

Usually, I'm pretty laid back. But there aren't enough hours in the day to get everything done during the holidays. I constantly have to remind myself that I have a chronic disease. No matter how well I feel, I'm not like everyone else. Because of my health limitations, I deserve to be a little selfish for my well-being.

Avoiding stress begins with setting boundaries. I have a difficult time saying no. I think it's because I don't want to hurt people's feelings, or have them think that I don't care. Making excuses not to go to a friend's party has become easier over the years. With family, it's a little trickier.

Holiday stress was worse in 2006, when I was diagnosed with IBD. I wasn't married, and my older sister had moved in with me as she planned for her wedding and impending move to England. My oldest sister had not yet moved to San Antonio, and my parents were still living in Oklahoma. For several years, I hosted almost all the holiday gatherings. Although everyone helped cook and clean, entertaining drained what little energy I had on top of the fatigue I already felt from IBD. Fortunately, everyone in my immediate family now lives within 90 miles, and we celebrate at my parents' home. When I've had enough celebrating, I go home.

While I still struggle with saying no, I've gotten a little better at saying yes. As I said, I'm a control freak. I'm also a perfectionist. I often refuse offers of help because I want things done the right way, which is my way, of course.

I'm very particular about decorating for Christmas, especially when it comes to the tree. Putting up our Christmas tree is a meticulous, two-day endeavor. I have a certain way of stringing the lights, and I hang each ornament like an artist applying paint to a canvas.

The first year we were married, I asked my husband to help, hoping to bond over the experience. Instead, I almost had an anxiety attack watching him wrap the lights haphazardly without carefully weaving them through the branches. I think he made it a quarter of the way through the first strand before I told him he could go watch sports on TV.

Allowing my husband to help decorate the tree causes me more stress than doing it myself. He helps with the hard work, bringing all the boxes downstairs and assembling the 8-foot tree. He's also in charge of hanging the garland over the garage door, although I perform quality control when he's done to make sure it's even and the extension cord is safely out of the way.

I've learned to relinquish other tasks, including shopping for and wrapping presents. My husband's family loves giving multiple gifts to each person; my family is content receiving one gift per person or couple. My husband and I are each responsible for our own family's gifts, which makes my to-do list shorter.

I do my best to manage stress, but I'm not always successful. Last Christmas, I wasn't as kind to myself as I should have been. I overextended myself and ended up getting sick. I was so miserable that I refused to take family pictures at Christmas Eve service when both families were pulling me in different directions. I also ended up sobbing at my sister's birthday lunch because I was so tired and frustrated that I just wanted to go home and get into bed.

This year, I need to keep in mind the "oxygen mask" rule of flight safety: In times of trouble, put on your mask before helping others with theirs. I need to take care of myself before I can take care of others. By doing this and following the [helpful tips for managing holiday](#)

stress suggested by the American Psychological Association, I can ensure a happy and healthy holiday.

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