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***Ask the Expert* Chat Series**

December 14, 2011 – Handling Holiday Stress with ADHD

Moderators – NRC Staff

Expert – Marie Paxson, former CHADD President

Moderator 1: Today's topic is "Handling Holiday Stress with ADHD." You may begin submitting your questions

Thank you for joining us today. We will begin shortly. Just to remind everybody, this is a moderated chat. All questions go to the moderator and we will do our best to post as many of your questions as possible.

It's likely that many of you may have similar questions dealing with the same issue. Even though your particular question may not be posted, please try to see how Marie Paxson's responses to other question may apply to your situation.

Welcome Marie, thank you for joining us today.

Marie Paxson: I'm delighted to be here. The holidays can be a lot of fun but they can also create some challenges.

Moderator 1: And now for our first question.

Nancy: How can we avoid ADHD tantrums during the holiday season?

Marie Paxson: A lot of can be done to reduce tantrums. There are many pro-active steps you can take.

First, it is helpful to understand your child's point of view. His/her whole world seems different than last week. Lots of company, visits to different places, meals out of schedule, etc. So just understand that many people with ADHD, no matter what their age, have difficulty with transitioning between activities.

I watched a parenting show once and the parent thought she was "channeling" her child's energy by signing him up for many daily activities. Turns out the child was having so many struggles with transitioning back and forth. The activities were the cause of the tantrums, not the solution for hyperactivity. So a lot of parenting children with ADHD is counter-intuitive.

Some parents find it helpful to reduce the amount of activities and outings. Especially activities that can either be too sedentary or too stimulating. And when it is necessary to attend a program that might cause the child to have a tantrum, you can go over with the child in advance about expectations of behavior and an overview of what to expect if rules aren't followed.

If you are pretty certain that your child will have a tantrum during an activity, many parents take two vehicles to an event and when they can see the first signs of a melt-down, they just take the overwhelmed child home. It is not a punishment. It is just a case of giving the child the calm environment that they need.

Sharon: I have a 13 year old daughter who is excited about the Holidays, but can't seem to handle the stress of simple things: finding the right outfit for a party; blaming others, especially me for anything that doesn't go exactly as expected. Any suggestions?

Marie Paxson: Black and white thinking, huh? It is possible she is on the receiving end of too much hype. And even 13 year old girls without ADHD are so uncertain about fitting in. Perhaps you could discuss with her in advance what exactly she envisions about a holiday activity. She may have an unrealistic idea of what will transpire, so in some ways she is setting herself up for disappointment, without even realizing it.

Learning to not blame others is a skill that we all have to learn. Unfortunately, the teenage brain is still a work in progress and parents are often the closest target. There are helpful books and articles about teenage girls with ADHD that address this. And if you know in your heart that she is not really mad at you, she is just upset because something didn't match her romanticized version, it will help you feel less criticized and rejected.

Moderator 1: Want to receive well-rounded comprehensive knowledge about ADHD? [Parent to Parent](#) courses offered in local communities and online, provide educational information and support for individuals and families dealing with AD/HD and learning to navigate the challenges of ADHD across the lifespan. [Learn more about our Parent to Parent](#) classes!

Mossorj: It's so easy to feel overwhelmed by everything during the holidays. What are some tips that I can use to try and stay calm and focused on what I need to accomplish?

Marie Paxson: I agree. One thing is for sure. We are getting a lot of messages about what we all "should" be doing to create a magical holiday. There are several ways to stay calm and focused. Most likely there are some things on your list that really aren't necessary or realistic to even start. So you could start by chopping them off of your list.

The other thing is to use checklists for the basics. There are many helpful websites with ADHD-friendly types of lists pertaining to the holidays. Plus apps and other technology that can be helpful. You may have to shorten the list of people that you buy gifts for. Or use convenience products to replace things you usually make from scratch or create by hand....

Not every room in your house must be decorated, you can attend a party without having had a manicure, you can relax your housekeeping standards in all rooms except the family room, kitchen, and bathrooms.

It helps me to remember that Christmas is only 12 days and Hannukah is an even shorter holiday ;)

CHADDict: I hate the holidays because it means dealing with the in-laws. I know how they feel about me and my parenting, and that they don't think I am right for their daughter, and they don't understand ADHD. How can I make this difficult situation easier to get through - feeling like I am under a microscope for a week?

Marie Paxson: Here is some advice if you have children that have flare-ups and prevent you from doing necessary tasks. Also, if you have noticed that when you are very busy or preoccupied, your children will increase attention getting behaviors. This happened to me frequently while my children lived at home. I felt like they were just daring me to accomplish something!

The best explanation I ever received was this: it is a survival method that has outgrown its usefulness, but children's brains are still hardwired to use this coping method. In ancient times if a parent turned their attention away from their child, for any reason, the child could perish. There were many dangers in everyday life. Any kind of temporary "neglect" was hazardous.

So the child had to do something to get back on the parent's radar to receive necessary care and supervision. So the best way to be proactive is to plan to spend a small amount of time each day giving undivided attention to your children.

After all, you will spend a lot more time with the aftermath of a misdeed than if you prevented it by taking the time to play a short game or reading a quick book. You will probably have to put this on your planner for this strategy to work.

Here is something that might help with dealing with judgmental people. I know just how you feel! It is really hard to be on the receiving end of so much criticism when we are doing the best we can. Ever notice that anything that is well designed includes a trap door, fire escape, ejector seat, egress, emergency exit? You can incorporate these theories into your life. If you know a relative is going to criticize your parenting, you can plan in advance how you will detach from him/her.

The first question to ask yourself is whether it is safe to disclose your child's ADHD. Some people are so close-minded, you truly are better off saying nothing about it. For really judgmental people, can you reduce the amount of time you have to be there? Figure out a couple of deflective sentences to say in advance. Change the subject with "I heard you did such-and-such fabulous thing this year. What was that like?" Even "let's talk about something else" for when you need to be really direct.

My husband uses "now, that's not party talk," when people discuss something too heavy, too personal, too critical, or too gross at light-hearted occasions. It's from an Everybody Loves Raymond episode about parties, so he says it like Marie Barone would say it.

Christmas gatherings are not the best time for heavy conversations. Hosts go to a lot of trouble to create a positive and joyful and peaceful atmosphere. But if you need to advocate for yourself or your child's ADHD symptoms, a phone call in advance could go a long way. Let's face it; if your mother is standing at the stove making gravy, this is not the time to explain why your family's behavior plan may seem like you are not reacting to your child's disruption in the other room.

A script for this conversation might be "Junior has been struggling with XYZ and here is how we are managing the situation. This method may seem a little different and before we had ADHD in our life, we would have thought so too."

Or if you have adult ADHD, say in advance that you find tracking multiple conversations at the dinner table exhausting and you plan to excuse yourself early. BUT if you had relayed this in advance, the host can process and come to terms with your plan before the day of the event. They really don't have to like your plan, you are just being courteous by letting them know in advance.

For an adult with ADHD "Sometimes I have trouble following this many conversations in one afternoon, so if you see me go outside for a walk around the block, don't be concerned. I can process information so much better if I take a break and do something physical." This way you are stating your needs – not asking for permission – and letting them know you have some accommodations handy.

Naturally, all accommodations should be as unobtrusive to other guests as possible.

NV_Wkg_Mom: Had a super easy time getting the tree up this year - as it was still in the playroom along with the decorations that never got put away properly LAST year!!! What are some strategies for avoiding *this* annual tradition? (3 generations of ADD in our home, so you can imagine the chaos...)

Marie Paxson: Actually, it kind of sounds like you found the solution, LOL! I learned a strategy from ADHD coach Linda Anderson. It is called "the body double," and it works whenever you have a task to do that you just know you will do anything to avoid.

You invite someone, either a family member in your home, or someone from your "inner circle," to come over and sit near you while you complete a dreaded task. This person isn't there to help or interfere. Their presence will act as an anchor, so that you don't start something and then get involved with something else.

I noticed that when my accountant comes to our family business once a month, I get a lot more paperwork accomplished while he is there. Now, he has no idea what I'm doing or should be doing. He doesn't even know that his presence is helping me stay on task. This is why people go to coffee shops to get some work done.

I'm not sure why it works, but it might be helpful. You could invite someone over and have them bring some paperwork or a book to read while you take down the tree and put away the decorations. Naturally it should be someone who won't distract you or become your "partner in crime" and find other more-interesting things to do.

Addison: what do you think about medication-free holidays?

Marie Paxson: All situations are individual and unique. There is a saying: "If you know one person with ADHD... you know one person with ADHD." That being said, many doctors disagree with medication holidays. After all, most people with ADHD still need help with their executive function challenges, whether they are doing detailed schoolwork or driving a car, holding a conversation, etc...

In my own family, my son was diagnosed about 17 years ago and medication holidays were the thinking of the day. Every year when school ended for the summer, he would have an injury or bike accident or similar situation. I've heard medication holidays described as having your glasses taken away if you are nearsighted – and being expected to see clearly!

So in my opinion, unless your doctor has a compelling reason to discontinue medication during school breaks, I think it can present a safety issue. I would want to know the rationale behind it.

Moderator 1: To learn more about Managing Medication please see our [What We Know Sheet #3](#), for children and adolescents, and our [What We Know Sheet #10](#) for adults.

Pantherfan: Any suggestions for a long (11 hour) car drive for a 10 year old child with ADHD? We are breaking it up over 2 days

Marie Paxson: That is a long trip and I'm sure you will all be happy to arrive at your destination. When my family was young, my biggest gripe was that they slept in the car and would be totally wound up when we arrived. Meantime, my husband and I felt rather bedraggled and in need of a nap.

But there are solutions, of course. Taking breaks for your child to do something physical will help. And luckily there are many toys and games designed for quiet play. Videos can be helpful also. It is hard to interact for 11 hours.

And special treats can be arranged for appropriate behavior. They don't even have to be very expensive. Kids love ice machines at hotels. My children loved being able to fill the ice bucket (half the time we didn't even need ice). ToysRUs has a special section for children with disabilities. Many are for physical disabilities, but several are for children with executive function differences or developmental delays.

Stanley: Going back to a previous question, great advice on the in-laws, but what about when YOU are the one with ADHD? I don't know how to handle it and always end up in a fight with my wife who tells me I am being rude when I withdraw to another room.

Marie Paxson: Sometimes it is best if you aren't the one saying it. If you think she would be willing to read some of the articles and books about adult ADHD that describe leaving the room as an antidote to feeling overwhelmed, that can help. You could also choose a calm time, in advance of an activity that you believe will cause you to feel overwhelmed, to describe exactly how you feel when too much information is coming at you at once.

It really is hard for others to understand. Especially if you function at a high level in other areas. People always think that intelligence can overcome symptoms of ADHD. It is possible that she doesn't understand the impact of ADHD on your life.

You just don't want to act like a hero for even attending the event :) In couples relationships, the whole give and take thing is pretty important. You are just stating your need for an accommodation. Perhaps if she sees that you are enjoying yourself more by taking a break, and are more willing to attend events where you might be uncomfortable, she will come around.

Sherry: Marie, any advice to the parent who has ADHD as well as the child?

Marie Paxson: I think the most important thing is to cut yourself a lot of slack. The simple fact is that your life is going to be different than others in your family or your neighborhood. And that is okay. Sticking with your routine as much as possible and making sure that you get enough rest, exercise, and a healthy diet will go a long way toward prevent you from getting out of sorts.

As a parent, you have a lot of little ones relying on you and watching how you model taking care of yourself. If you are calm and reasonable and have scaled things back to what you can manage, they will make note of it and use it as a guide how they handle things.

A lot of what we consider important for successful holidays was created by advertisers. Sometimes bringing it back to reality really is best. We all like holiday "magic," but sometimes we oversell it a bit. The reality is that we will get some nice gifts, attend some fun gatherings, eat some rich food and spend less time at work or school. It is that simple. Not every present will be life-altering; not every gathering will be interesting. And in a few days, we will all be back to routine.

Moderator 1: For more information on ADHD in adults, please see our [What We Know Sheet #9: Diagnosis of ADHD in Adults](#).

Pantherfan: Over the long break, our 13 year old "typical" child is sure to get frustrated with the 11 year old with ADHD (especially during the long car rides). Any suggestions to help the older child cope with his sibling?

Marie Paxson: It's painful to watch, isn't it? In addition to the many strategies I'm sure you've tried, there are some resources that may be helpful. There is a book called "My brother is a world class pain" that addresses sibling issues when a family is affected by ADHD.

If your son with ADHD has significant behavior challenges, there is a national organization that presents a program called "Sibshops". The child without emotional or behavioral challenges attends some fun activities on Saturday mornings. Mixed in with the fun are opportunities for guided group discussions on living with brothers and sisters who behave differently. Many families have found this program to be helpful.

It is important that you do not become cast in the role of "judge and jury," but we all know that sometimes our kids can't just work things out for themselves like typical kids (without bloodshed).

Peace: Trying to deal with ADD father, 60, and now 21-year-old son is difficult when I am in the middle. I thought things would get easier with time, but now with my husband who has recently lost his job and my son who has decided to not go back to university after this semester, it is quite stressful. Any tips for calming the nerves on all sides?

Marie Paxson: That is a LOT to handle! My main concern is for you and your health, both physical and mental. I'm not really sure that it is your role to calm things down. I know that sounds like an odd thing to say. Only you know your own life, but if you were to put yourself and your well-being first, would things totally all apart? Or just be rather inconvenient?

If they would totally fall apart, then most likely you are working very hard. Perhaps even harder than they are. Sometimes people have to become pretty uncomfortable to make changes in their life. So some of the "smoothing over" might be removing their chance to take ownership of their own situations.

I'm not saying you should just turn your back on them cold-turkey, but it could be time for other supports to be put in place for them. Supports that don't come from you. You may decide to help locate whatever services they need to manage their own lives. Then you can go back to being in the Mom role and the daughter role.

I was in a situation where I did too much for those who needed to take ownership of their lives, and a lot of the help I provided was really useful. But after a while it became a burden on me and my health was starting to suffer and I was becoming moody and acted in a controlling manner.

It was hard to watch my family members make their own choices and their own mistakes. But as I focused more on my life and my choices (I had back-burnered a lot of important stuff because I was so focused on others), I became easier to live with. And my relationships become more of a partnership and collaboration than when I was doing all of the heavy lifting. I hope this helps.

Moderator 1: For more information about parenting and family life, check out Nadine Taylor-Barnes's monthly CHADD blog. In addition to Ms. Taylor-Barnes' writing monthly on parenting, Gina Pera discusses how ADHD affects adult relationships, and Nancy Ratey discusses coaching. Stay updated on our new blogs by visiting <http://www.chadd.org> weekly!

ADDitup: I usually avoid malls and Walmart, Target and stores like that because I have impulse problems. I always buy things I don't need. But Christmas Shopping means going to these places, and I have already impulse bought things - ideas for staying on task and only buying the gifts for others?

Marie Paxson: I hear you! And this time of year the prices are so low, it is really hard to resist sometimes. One solution, although it is slightly more time-consuming, would be to visit the store and

"mentally" choose the gift but not buy it until the next day. This is easier when it is not 10 days before Christmas :)

You could also pay with cash and leave your debit/credit card at home. Then you can only come out of the store with what you have the cash to pay for. You could also enlist a friend to go with you. I heard a woman with ADHD once ask a friend to go shopping with her. The friend's sole responsibility was to prevent her from buying anything that wasn't on the list.

The other alternative is to keep the receipts and if you have an impulse then at least you can take it back. There are also classes throughout the country that are hosted by the "Consumer Counseling Bureau" (NOTE: This is a non-profit organization. Not one of those fee-for-service debt reduction companies). The classes provide education and help about budgeting. More importantly, they provide information about our relationship to money. That is often the key to our spending habits.

There is also a book by author Stephanie Sarkis called "ADHD and Money" and several people have mentioned that they found it helpful.

Moderator 1: Missed part of the chat? Past chat transcripts are available to CHADD members as a benefit. To learn more about joining CHADD, visit: <http://www.chadd.org>.

We have less than ten minutes left and this will be our final question. If we were unable to get to your question please contact one of our Health Information Specialists on ADHD by calling 1-800-233-4050 between 9 AM- 5PM EST or by clicking on the "[Ask A Question](#)" link on the top of our [website](#).

Jo: How do we keep our kids focused in school these last few days before the winter break?

Marie Paxson: My suggestion would be to keep the routine at home as normal as possible. You might need to have one room that is "holiday-neutral." Especially if your child has mid-term exams or big projects pending. Or if you have a lot of work responsibilities at the end of the year.

Consider this: When you are or your child have a complicated project or a big deadline, is it helpful to go to the library or use a study corral? Then maybe a sparse or undecorated room would be a good haven. The more you keep the focus on education and less on hyping about the holidays, the more they will stay focused on their schoolwork.

While it is not completely possible to avoid every evening activity, keep in mind that school ends about 3-5 days before Christmas, so they will have an opportunity to stay up late, visit family and friends, go to a shopping center or a mall.

I have a friend who is a teacher and she kept to her teaching routine as much as possible. She felt that even though the holidays are a lot of fun and it is so tempting to see them through the eyes of children, it just wasn't worth getting them too far out of routine.

The kids who were distractible had difficulty functioning, the lively ones got carried away, the kids who had trouble with friendships became overly emotional. She felt she was doing them a favor by taking it down a notch.

Admittedly this will be difficult to do. But you might see a difference in their attitude toward attending school this close to the holidays.

Moderator 1: Thank you Marie, for your wonderful insights and helpful hints! :-)

Marie Paxson: I hope you all have peaceful holidays.

Moderator 1: Thanks to everyone who joined us today. Our next chat on ADHD & Homework Struggles with Ann Dolin, PhD is scheduled for Jan. 18 from 3:30-5 p.m.

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