

Handling Seasonal Stress

A chat with Marie Paxson

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How can we avoid ADHD tantrums during the holiday season?

There are many proactive steps you can take to reduce tantrums. First, it is helpful to understand your child's point of view. His or her whole world seems different than last week—lots of company, visits to different places, meals out of schedule, etc. Understand that many people with ADHD, no matter what their age, have difficulty with transitioning between activities.

I watched a parenting show once where the parent thought she was “channeling” her child's energy by signing him up for many daily activities. It turned out that the child was having many struggles with transitioning back and forth. The activities were the cause of the tantrums, not the solution for hyperactivity. A lot of parenting children with ADHD is counterintuitive.

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 expectations of behavior with the child in advance and an overview of what to expect if rules aren't followed.

Many parents take two vehicles to an event if they are pretty certain that their child will have a tantrum during an activity. When they see the first signs of a meltdown, they just take the overwhelmed

child home. It is not a punishment. It is just a case of giving the child the calm environment he or she needs.

My thirteen-year-old daughter is excited about the holidays, but can't seem to handle the stress of simple things, such as finding the right outfit for a party. She blames others, especially me, for anything that doesn't go exactly as expected. Any suggestions?

Black and white thinking, huh? It is possible she is on the receiving end of too much hype. And thirteen-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





Have you noticed that when you are very busy or preoccupied, your children will increase attention-getting behaviors?

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.

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?

We get 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 lists pertaining to the holidays, plus apps and technology that can be helpful. You may have to shorten the list of people to buy gifts. You can 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, and you can relax your housekeeping standards in all rooms except the family room, kitchen, and bathrooms.

It helps to remember that Christmas is only twelve days... and Hanukkah is an even shorter holiday!

Any advice for the parent who has ADHD?

The most important thing is to cut yourself a lot of slack. Your life is going to be different than that of others in your family or neighborhood, and that is okay. Stick with your routine as much as possible and make sure that you get enough rest and exercise, and eat a healthy diet. Keeping these habits will go a long way toward preventing you from getting out of sorts.

As a parent, you have 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 for how they handle things.

Much of what we consider important for successful holidays was

created by advertisers. Sometimes bringing things 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.

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. They don't understand ADHD. How can I make this difficult situation—feeling like I am under a microscope for a week—easier to get through?

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 or her.

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

My husband uses the sentence, "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.

Holiday gatherings are not the best time for heavy conversations. Hosts go to a lot of trouble to create a positive, 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: When your mother is standing at the stove making gravy, it 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. When you relay this in advance, the host can process and come to terms with your plan before the day of the event. They don't have to like your plan, but you are just being courteous by letting them know beforehand.

An adult with ADHD can say, "Sometimes I have trouble following 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.

My children act up at the worst possible times during the holidays. What can I do?

Do they have flare-ups that prevent you from doing necessary tasks? Have you 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 heard 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, 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.

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.

We 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? We have three generations of ADHD in our home, so you can imagine the chaos.

Actually, it sounds like you found the solution! I learned a strategy from ADHD coach Linda Anderson. It is called “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” in finding other, more interesting things to do.

Any suggestions for an eleven-hour long car drive for a ten-year-old child with ADHD? We are breaking it up over two days.

That is a long trip, and I’m sure you will all be happy to arrive at your destination. When my

children were 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.

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 eleven hours.

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). Toys“R”Us 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.

Over the long break, our thirteen-year-old “typical” child is sure to get frustrated with the eleven- year-old with ADHD. Do you have any suggestions to help the older child cope with his sibling?

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. The book *My Brother is a World Class Pain* by Michael Gordon (GSI Publications, 1992) addresses sibling issues in a family affected by ADHD.

If your son with ADHD has significant behavior challenges, siblingsupport.org offers 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).

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

Keep the routine at home as normal as possible. You might one room that is holiday-neutral, especially if your child has mid-term exams or big projects pending. You might need this room for yourself if you have a lot of work responsibilities at the end of the year.

When you or your children have a complicated project or deadline, is it helpful to go to the library or use a study carrel? Then maybe a sparse or undecorated room would be a good haven. The more you keep the focus on education and less on holiday hype, the more the children will stay focused on their schoolwork.

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

My friend who is a teacher 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 your children's attitudes. 🍎