



## Enjoying the holidays

- **Holidays can be challenging** times with enormous expectations generated at family gatherings. Large groups of people can be uncomfortable and over-stimulating for anyone. Well before Christmas, it is helpful for each family member to talk about feelings and expectations.
- **Discuss what's going to be happening** over the holiday season so there are no surprises. Each member of the family needs to determine his/her involvement.
- **Don't compare with past years.** Don't try to make this holiday "the best ever". Take it as it comes and enjoy it. The house doesn't need to be spotless and every meal doesn't need to be prepared from scratch.
- **Realize that you can't please everyone** or do everything for everybody.
- **Pace yourself.** Allow yourself to enjoy the holiday season. Take rest stops.
- **Consider starting new traditions** and creating new memories.
- **Delegate.** Don't try to do it all. Ask others for help. People like to be useful and involved.
- **Spend some time alone.** If you find yourself getting anxious or tired, find a quiet spot to relax and recharge your batteries.
- **Don't drink too much and don't eat too much** as both will diminish your energy. It's easy to overindulge around the holidays.
- **Family members shared how helpful it was to hear encouragement.** Try to place yourself in other family members' shoes and think about what they would like to hear or need to hear.
- **Learn to say "no".** Saying no is an important life skill to protect yourself from stress and overload.

# family to family

FOR FIRST-EPIISODE PSYCHOSIS FAMILIES

## What Are You Doing During The Holidays?

The holiday season can be a stressful time for many of us with holiday shopping, celebrations and family expectations. Living with psychosis in the family often creates additional challenges and stresses for each and every family member. Stress affects our health, emotional well-being, energy, relationships, productivity and overall quality of life.

Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah or other holidays, it's important to recognize the early warning signs of becoming stressed and learn coping mechanisms to relieve your stress.

General guidelines for managing stress are the same for everyone. **First, learn what causes your stress.**

Family members we spoke with identified a long list of stressors, some of which were financial concerns, time constraints and worrying about relapse. Young people recovering from psychosis identified the stress of worrying about interacting with additional company coming into the house, feeling the pressure from peers to be out every evening celebrating and feeling pressured to drink or smoke marijuana. What are your holiday season stress "triggers"? It's important to know that stress can also come from a happy thing like getting into a new relationship, moving into a new home or getting a new job.

**Second, learn your own reactions to stress. Learn to recognize the signs that you are affected.**

Our families shared that they don't sleep as well, are more irritable, more critical and angry, easily blame and finger point and feel physically and emotionally exhausted. We've included a comprehensive list to help you recognize your warning signs of stress.

**Third, learn coping mechanisms to relieve the stress.**

Coping mechanisms include exercising, listening to music, reading, doing a puzzle, or trying some of the relaxation techniques we've included in this newsletter. Be gentle with yourself!

We're pleased to include thoughts from Jane Hamilton-Wilson, Psychotic Disorders Clinic, Hamilton, Ontario in her article "Taking Care of Yourself".

We'll talk about the International Early Psychosis Association Conference in our next issue of *Family to Family*. But I will mention that the National First Episode Psychosis Family Network together with the Prevention and Early Intervention Program for Psychoses (PEPP) presented a well received two hour symposium, "The Family as a Potent Force in Early Intervention for Psychosis".

Remember to look after yourself and ask for help whenever you feel you need it. A local family support group can provide support and sometimes it really helps to talk to a professional counselor.

Wishing you a joyful, hopeful holiday season and a wonderful, playful winter.

*Families can make a difference!*

Sharon Scott, Editor

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# Taking Care of **YOURSELF**

*by Jane Hamilton-Wilson*

(Note: Relative refers to your relative recovering from psychosis.)

If you are like most families, the onset of your relative's psychosis came "out of the blue" and no doubt threw the entire family into a state of crisis. In fact it is rare to meet families who have not experienced a sense of crisis following the onset of psychotic illness in one of their members. The stress starts prior to the initial assessment phase and is ongoing. Throughout the recovery process, it is natural for families to do everything they can to help. Too often though, families neglect their own needs and health, subjecting themselves to long periods of stress which can increase their vulnerability to serious health problems.

Stress is inherent in having a relative with psychosis. Over time, this inattention to your own health and wellness may lead to burnout. Taking care of yourself is essential. In fact you will be much more effective in helping your relative if you engage in regular self-care activities. That means giving yourself permission to slot in pleasant "stress busting" endeavors. Self-nurturing activities preserve your own health and communicate a positive coping message to your relative. Families need to make deliberate efforts to focus less upon their relative and more upon continuing/re-establishing their regular interests and activities.

There are many practical strategies one can learn about managing stress. However, as a rule, it is most helpful to approach each day as one that holds a potential for good outcomes. Don't be afraid to go out, spend time with friends, exercise and engage in fun and light hearted pleasures. Worrying and restricting your own activities will not help you or your relative. In fact, going out will give your relative a message that life is getting back to normal. Concentrating on illness symptoms and clinical appointments should never become a family lifestyle. This is too narrow a focus and may make your relative feel like a burden. If everyone assumes a balanced and healthy lifestyle the whole family will recover a shared sense of equilibrium and strength more quickly.

As the holiday season approaches, it is important to note that this can be a stressful time for families. Depending on the stage of recovery, your relative may be socially withdrawn, feeling fatigued or simply unable to tolerate the stimulation of a busy social agenda. Although Christmas can be a fun and family centered time, your relative may not share your enthusiasm for the traditional festivities. This is not unusual at early stages of recovery, when even positive events can evoke anxiety or perhaps even a relapse of psychotic symptoms. If this is the case, you may want to ask your relative which activities he or she wishes to participate in. Certainly invite your relative to join in all the family activities but also be respectful of a decision to occasionally "sit one out". This will help preserve health and avoid last minute family tensions. One more thing, consider having a "dry" festive season this year. As alcohol can undermine the effectiveness of treatment medications, joining your relative in abstinence can be beneficial. It is very difficult to expect your relative to abstain if everyone else is freely partaking in alcoholic beverages.

Above all, families must be gentle with each other. There isn't an instruction booklet to guide your activities. Learn from your successes and quickly forgive little errors. Guilt serves no healthy purpose in family life. Although there is no single way to cope with psychosis, all families share the power to instill hope, to reach out with compassion, and to acknowledge and inspire the collective courage required to enhance recovery.

***"Families need to make deliberate efforts to focus less upon their relative and more upon continuing/re-establishing their regular interests and activities."***

## How Does Stress **SHOW UP FOR YOU?**

It's important to recognize stress so that we can deal with it. Stress shows up in four ways: through physical, intellectual, emotional and behavioral symptoms. What are the signs of stress to watch for?

### 1. Physical symptoms

Chronic stress symptoms include headaches, dizziness, clenching the jaw or grinding the teeth, tight or sore muscles in the neck or across the tops of the shoulders, chest pains, indigestion, nausea, cramps, constipation or diarrhea, back pain and tightness. Hands and feet may feel cold or sweaty. Appetite may be lost or increased, and loss of interest in sex is often reported. Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of stress. Lots of people have trouble sleeping. Please note that all of these symptoms may be caused by other factors so it's important to see your doctor to decide if your symptoms are stress-related or not.

### 2. Intellectual or cognitive symptoms/signs

A common stress symptom is having difficulty concentrating. Others include having problems with memory and having difficulty making decisions. Your mind might race or go blank.

### 3. Emotional symptoms

It's common for people who are stressed to feel nervous, anxious, tense, jittery, agitated, restless or on edge. You might also feel short-tempered, impatient and irritable. Some individuals may feel themselves slowing down, feeling flat and sad or blue.

### 4. Behavioral symptoms

These symptoms include compulsive eating, smoking, drinking, nail-biting, fidgeting.

Most people have a number of symptoms of stress that are characteristic for them. **Identifying stress is the first step in doing something about it.** Try to value these symptoms – they represent a message from your body to you.

- Think about your symptoms when you're feeling stressed or upset. Write them down.
- Ask your family and friends what signs of stress they notice when you're stressed.
- Practice being more aware of these symptoms.

## Try A **RELAXATION TECHNIQUE!**

### BREATHING EXERCISES

You can calm yourself by consciously controlling your breathing. Try one of these exercises:

#### One breath

Take a deep breath, s-l-o-w-l-y. Count to three and then let it out, s-l-o-w-l-y. Make a humming sound while breathing out. You'll be amazed at how much calmer you feel.

#### Deep breathing

Deep breathing can be done anytime, anywhere. Deep breathing provides extra oxygen to the blood and causes the body to release endorphins, which are naturally occurring hormones that re-energize and promote relaxation.

1. Slowly inhale through your nose, expanding your abdomen before allowing air to fill lungs.
2. Reverse the process as you exhale.

Do this exercise for three to five minutes whenever you feel tense.

#### Exhalation breathing

This slows your breathing to help calm you down.

1. Lie on your back with your arms at your sides.
2. As you begin to breathe in (inhale), raise your arms towards the ceiling (elbows bent). Move your arms all the way up and over your head to the floor as you inhale.

3. Reverse the order: breathe out (exhale) slowly and smoothly as you return your arms to your sides.

After you have done this several times, slowly inhale and exhale without moving your arms. Do this exercise for ten minutes or longer – it's up to you.

### PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

This is a technique to help relax tense muscles.

1. Sit or lie down on your back in a comfortable, quiet room. Close your eyes.
2. Make tight fists, breathe in, hold for five seconds, then relax your hands and breath out slowly. Do this three times. Pay attention to the different sensations of tension and relaxation.
3. Repeat step 2 with all your muscle groups: arms, shoulders, chest, abdomen, back, hips, thighs, lower legs and feet.

At first, it may take about 20 minutes. With practice, you'll be able to do this in about five minutes, if you want to.

*“Be gentle with yourself.”*

# Stressbusters

## Comedy Break – Laugh at Stress

Set aside some time for laughter, your body's natural stress-release mechanism. Rent your favorite comedy video – what are some of your favorites? Tape a TV show that you know makes you laugh and keep it on hand for stress emergencies. Go to the library and borrow a book that can make you laugh. Read the daily comics in the newspaper. Or, phone the funniest person you know!

### Our Favorite Comedy Videos!

- “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation”
- “A Christmas Story”
- “Jingle All The Way”
- “Dr. Seuss – How the Grinch Stole Christmas”
- “Charlie Brown’s Christmas”
- “Something’s Gotta Give”
- “50 First Dates”
- “Mrs. Doubtfire”
- “Meet the Parents”
- “Shrek” and “Shrek Two”

## Walking Breaks

Walk away from stress. Instead of sitting down for another cup of stress-inducing caffeine on your coffee break, lunch hour or when you are at home ... try going for a stress relieving and energizing walk. If you don't like walking by yourself, try forming a walking club with two to three of your friends or co-workers.

## Going-to-Bed Ritual

Try getting in the habit of brewing a cup of herbal tea – chamomile is particularly good at bedtime. A full stomach can make it hard to get to sleep, so keep any bedtime snacking light.

## A Quiet Environment

Turn off your TV and leave it off for 48 hours. You'll be amazed at how much less tense you'll feel when you're free of its demands.

## “The Serenity Prayer”

They call it the “Serenity Prayer” for a good reason. Many families use the words “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference” as a mantra.

## Scented Bath

Try adding a few drops of scented oil to your bath, light a candle and settle in for a soothing soak. A relaxing bath works as well as anything to reduce stress.

All of the activities above are powerful ways to look after yourself.

## We would like to hear from you!

We are very interested in your ideas, comments, stories and suggestions regarding what you would like to see here. So if you'd like to share with us please contact:

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This newsletter is intended as an additional source of information and support and does not replace the advice of your family's health care team. The views expressed in *Family to Family* are those of the contributors.

Our resources are limited and we are looking for sites in each province to assist with the distribution of this newsletter. If you are associated with an organization, agency or clinic that would find this newsletter useful for clients and could help by distributing a number of copies, please contact the Editor.

**We also encourage everyone to photocopy and distribute this newsletter.**

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