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7 Tips to Enjoy (Not Dread) Holidays with Your Family

Everywhere you look, the holidays are pictured as joyful, picture-perfect gatherings: smiling families around a glowing table, kids who never cry, teens who never roll their eyes, and adults who magically agree on everything. Of course, that's not real life. Real families are wonderfully messy, complicated, and sometimes… exhausting.

For many of us, the holidays are one of the few times we see certain relatives. Reuniting can remind you how much you care about each other—but it can also stir up old stress, grief, or tension. Add in the pressure to fit a whole year's worth of memories into just a few days (sometimes across multiple households), and it's easy for "festive" to turn into "frazzled."

The good news? With a little planning and perspective, the holidays really can feel more joyful and less draining. Here are a few ideas to help:

- **Have realistic expectations.**

  Focus on having a meaningful holiday together rather than a Facebook-ready one. It's OK if the kids—or the grown-ups—aren't always on their best behavior. Embrace the imperfections that give your family its unique personality.

- **Be mindful of your feelings.**

  If you'll be around people who push your buttons, approach the situation with an attitude of mindfulness. Focus your attention on what's happening at the moment—not something that happened 10 years ago. Notice and accept any feelings that come up but try to withhold judgment for now.

- **Start positive conversations.**

  To head off heated debates, steer the conversation toward topics that family members have in common, such as a shared hobby or an upcoming happy occasion. If the holiday has spiritual or cultural significance for your family, this is a good time to pass on some of the day's history and meaning to the younger generation.

- **Express your appreciation.**

  This is also an ideal time to let others know how much you appreciate the support they've shown you throughout the year. Research shows that expressing gratitude can lower your own stress level.

- **Share fun family activities.**

  Your family could take a walk, go ice skating, play a board game, make decorations, visit a children's museum, or catch a family-friendly show. Make a point of repeating some favorite activities year after year. These kinds of family traditions are the glue that helps bond family members together.

- **Don't try to do too much.**

  A little family fun is great, but more is not necessarily better. Young kids can be easily overwhelmed by too many changes and too much excitement. To avert meltdowns, stick with their usual routine for naps and bedtime. To simplify the schedule, consider visiting different branches of the family on different holidays or in alternate years.

- **Sneak in some alone time.**

  If you start feeling stressed, take a few minutes to walk the family dog, listen to music, read a book, or go for a run. You'll enjoy your family time more if you step away and decompress when you need to.

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