Strategies for Coping with Holiday Stress 
(and Preventing Holiday Blues)

This handout was prepared by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D., Copyright © 2007, revised 2010
The author grants permission for use of this handout to the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University.

1. Remember that when people have been apart from one another, it can take time to find a common wavelength. Sometimes basic shared activities – playing a board game, preparing a meal together, walking the dog, looking at old photo albums, cleaning or decorating the house for an occasion, driving in the car together to run errands – can offer ways to reconnect.

2. Spend time with people who understand you and appreciate you for who you are. Try to limit your time with people who leave you feeling judged.

3. Stay present; practice mindfulness. If you cannot avoid time with people or situations that are difficult for you, practice mindfulness – simply observing and describing in your own mind, without evaluation or judgment, what you notice and experience. Mindfulness allows you to play anthropologist – participant-observer – in whatever situation you find yourself in. Mindfulness can offer you a means to prevent others’ judgments from getting under your skin.

4. Think about how you would prefer to observe the holidays. See if you can change even one old habit, ritual, or routine that no longer feels right for you. Try to introduce one new custom, tradition, or practice that will help you stay attentive to your deeper values.

5. Remember that it is okay to take time out. Sometimes family gatherings are laced with old, negative patterns. Let yourself take some time for a solo activity: take a walk, get some moderate exercise, read for a while in a coffee shop or library, or run an errand.

6. Know and honor your limits as best you can. Learn to say “No,” and “For a little while,” and “Yes, but not just now.” You don’t have to be Superdaughter/son/grandchild/sibling/friend. If you honor your limits, you are less likely to get irritable or resentful and more likely to be present and authentic when you are with people.

7. Shop early, if you can, to avoid the crowds and stress of last-minute shopping. If you do find yourself shopping at the last minute, surrender to that experience and see if you can find a way to enjoy it.

8. As you shop, be mindful that more gifts or more expensive presents do not mean a better holiday. When commercialism becomes too oppressive, try to ground yourself in simple pleasures and in the fundamentals that matter most to you.

9. Take time to reflect. Meditate, pray, journal, or engage in another practice that allows you to slow down and to attend to a deeper part of yourself. Reflect on the meaning of the season or how the meaning has changed and continues to change over time.

10. Attend a religious, spiritual, or community service. Being part of such a service can help you remember what is important and help you stay connected to the deeper parts of your soul.

11. Allow yourself to feel uncomfortable. You don’t need to seek pain or embrace discomfort, but the reality is that pain and discomfort are part of life. Pain is not confirmation of weakness or
inadequacy or unworthiness. If you feel painful feelings, let yourself feel them. Cry if you are sad. Tears can be evidence of attentiveness to self, other, and the truth of your experience.

12. Check in via phone, text, Facebook, or email with someone who helps you remember who you are now, what matters to you now.

13. Bring with you some item – or wear some piece of clothing or jewelry, or listen to some piece of music – that leaves you feeling connected to your most confident, self-possessed sense of who you are, who you have become.

14. If you are grieving during this season, remember that you are not alone. Find community with others who can appreciate your grief. Get support from your friends or your spiritual community. Write a year-end letter to someone who is no longer with you.

15. Breathe. When feeling stressed, stop and take a deep breath. You might be surprised by the positive effect of noticing your breath and of breathing more deeply.

16. Tend to your body’s basic needs for rest, exercise, and good nutrition.

17. Avoid excessive or compulsive behaviors. When drinking, spending, sexual activity, dieting, eating, exercising, computer/internet activity, or other behaviors are overrelied upon as coping strategies or as escapes from emotional pain and stress, those behaviors can become compulsive. Compulsive behavior leaves us feeling out of control and tends to create more pain and suffering in our life. Mindfulness – being present to our experience of what is, including our experience of emotional pain and discomfort – is an antidote to compulsion.

18. Approach your experience, and others’, with curiosity and an openness to discovery and dialogue (rather than with certainty or closed-minded declaration or debate).

19. Resist the temptation to sanctify or vilify someone; resist the temptation to make more or less of an experience than it deserves.

20. Keep a sense of humor. Let yourself enjoy the moments of pleasure you experience in being among family and friends. Smile at the absurdities we human beings encounter in our efforts to connect with one another.