



# Relationship Matters

## Surviving Holiday Stress

**Q:** The holidays are always stressful in our family. We have two small kids. We have large and demanding extended families. My husband and I feel torn in a million directions during the holidays.

**I feel like our relationship suffers the most during the holiday season.**

We barely spend time with each other. We're always fighting and arguing. We have a hard time figuring out our plans.

**What can we do to make the holidays easier on our relationship?**

**A:** First, it's important to realize that stress increases for many families during the holidays. It's easy to get caught up in all the demands of the holidays. You have less time to focus on each other and your relationship.

**You can alleviate some of the holiday stress by identifying the root cause of the stress and working to resolve those challenges.**

Is a specific family member causing issues? Do you both argue too much about presents for the kids? What is causing most of the stress during the holidays?

Once you have identified the root cause of the stress, it's easier to find ways to deal with it together.

In addition, setting expectations before the holidays start can help.

For example, create a list of things you want to accomplish during the holidays. Then, divide the list, so each person has a fair share of tasks.

Stick to your list, so you'll always know what to expect during the holidays and can avoid unpleasant surprises.

**Q:** I'll try to create a list. But I'm worried that it will turn into another fight.

We always have a hard time dividing up the holiday chores. Each of us feels like we're doing more than our fair share.

I resent having to do all the cooking and shopping.

My husband gets to do the fun holiday chores, like wrapping presents and putting ribbons on everything.

I would like him to help with other chores like cleaning the house and buying the essentials for the meals. But he doesn't like doing these things.

### **How can I prevent another argument about holiday chores?**

**A:** You'll probably continue to get resistance from your husband as you try to convince him to do chores he doesn't enjoy.

You can't force him to love to clean or cook. However, you can share that you're feeling overwhelmed and need the help.

Consider how you can split these chores fairly.  
Think of different aspects of the chores that he could do:

- \* Does your husband hate cooking but love to prep the meals?
- \* Can he clean out the vacuum after you're done with it?
- \* Can he sort junk mail?

Try to find tasks that appeal to your husband but still help you.

**Q:** One of our biggest issues is that we can never decide on gifts for each other. We argue about setting a budget on gifts. We fight about what we really need every year. He says I don't listen to what he wants and never get him the right gift.

My husband also gets upset when I return his gifts, but he has a tendency to give me things I already have.

I don't know how to fix this, and I never thought buying a gift for your spouse would be this difficult.

**Do you have some ideas for resolving this gift issue?**

**A:** Gifts can create an enormous amount of pressure during the holidays.

**Couples often feel obligated to outdo each other or outdo purchases from previous years.**

Not only does this create stress, but it also adds unnecessary financial burdens.

There are several ways couples can handle gifts during the holidays:

- \* First, you can make a joint decision not to give each other gifts. This means you won't feel obligated to buy anything.
- \* Another option is to set a budget limit on how much you'll spend on a gift. Commit to this number and don't spend more. You may want

to consider signing a handwritten contract to stick to the budget.

- \* If you decide to buy each other gifts, make it easier. Create a list of what you want and give it to each other. Be specific and give details about what you want. **Avoid turning shopping for gifts into a mystery game.**

Tell your husband exactly what you want, and ask him the same question. This can dramatically reduce stress during the holidays.

**Q:** I'll use these ideas for getting gifts for my husband. But what do I do about getting gifts for our kids during the holidays?

Buying gifts for our kids is always a big argument at our house.

**I am tired of all this stress about gifts.**

My husband wants to buy them fun things like toys or gadgets. I would rather spend the money on something useful for them, like clothes. They get

something useful for them, like clothes. They get enough toys from their grandparents.

He's always undermining me and getting them things I said we weren't going to buy.

Plus, I think we're spoiling the kids too much. They have huge toy bins filled with things they never play with. My husband disagrees and says the holidays are a time to have fun and spend.

### **How can we figure out what gifts to get our kids for the holidays?**

**A:** Consider talking to your husband before buying any gifts and making a mutual decision to only buy one gift per child.

This will allow your husband to get the kids something they enjoy without going over the budget. It should eliminate some of the arguments that happen after the holidays because of the gifts.

It may be tempting to give your kids clothes or useful items during the holidays. However, don't

they already get these types of things during the year? Consider buying them one special toy and saving the clothes for another time.

**Another option is to take the children on a fun vacation instead of buying them gifts.**

You can tell them that their gift is a trip to Disney or another fun place. They may not miss getting new toys once they hear about the vacation. Instead of adding to their growing toy bins, you'll be adding to their memories.

**Q:** Not only do we fight about gifts, we also have a hard time figuring out family gatherings every year.

He wants to spend time with his family, and I want to see mine.

He claims my parents are annoying and pushy. He doesn't like spending holiday dinners with them. Plus, my mother is a vegetarian, so all of her holiday meals are vegetarian. My husband refuses to eat anything she cooks and says it's bland. This always upsets her and creates a fuss during the meals.



On the other hand, I am tired of his parents taking over the holiday meals and not letting me have a voice. I think they're more pushy than my parents.

**Our main issue is that our parents live in different states and refuse to come see us.**

Every year, we have a big fight about where we'll go for the holidays.

**How can we stop these fights about our parents?**

**A:** Couples often have disagreements about which in-laws they should visit during the holidays. This is also a source of significant stress in many marriages and the starting point of many arguments.

**You have several options for handling family visits during the holidays:**

- \* One option is to alternate the years that you visit the in-laws. For example, you can visit his parents one year and your parents the next year.

year.

- \* Another option is to have the in-laws come to see you during the holidays.
- \* It's also possible to skip the family visits completely. Although it may be hard to say no to your parents or his parents, staying home can decrease your stress.

Whatever option you choose, it's important that both you and your husband are comfortable with it and don't waver from it.

**It's crucial to put up a united front that won't be swayed by either set of parents.**

This may cause some strife in the beginning, especially if you choose to stay home or ask them to come see you. They may not be used to you pushing back and saying no.

However, it strengthens your relationship and alleviates stress when you set clear boundaries with both sides of the family.

Q: I'll consider these options for dealing with the in-laws.

Another source of stress for us is the annual holiday newsletter and card.

Sending a newsletter and holiday card is a tradition in my family that goes back generations.

**But my husband hates both the newsletter and card tradition.**

Every year, I have to fight him to get our picture taken together as a family. He says it's a boring and outdated tradition. He also thinks it's a waste of money.

I try to limit the expenses by buying cheaper matching sweaters and either taking the picture myself with a timer or having a friend do it. However, he still gets angry about it.

My husband also hates the newsletter. No matter what I put in it, he thinks we're boasting.

He doesn't like sharing things with other family members.

I am at my wit's end and don't know what to do anymore. I don't want to stop this family tradition, but it's hard to continue without his cooperation.

**Short of photoshopping him into the pictures, what can I do?**

**A:** The holiday newsletter and card have become popular traditions over the years. However, fewer families are doing them today, so it's understandable that your husband may feel uncomfortable.

It seems that he's concerned about oversharing and boasting. In addition, if you're sending the card and newsletter to many people, it can get expensive.

**First, clarify your own feelings about the holiday newsletter and card:**

- \* Are you continuing this tradition out of a sense of obligation or because you truly value it?
- \* Are you putting together the holiday newsletter and card to please others or to keep up with them?
- \* Are you truly sharing important things in the holiday newsletter and card that can't be shared in other ways such as online or on social media?

Answer these questions before talking with your husband.

**If you love this tradition and want to carry it on, sit down with your husband and have a serious conversation.**

Tell him that the tradition of the holiday newsletter and card is very important to you. It's part of your family history and means a lot to you. Calmly discuss things from your perspective instead of blaming your husband.

Avoid trying to make your husband feel guilty or bad about not wanting to participate.

Try to explain how much this means to you, so he is convinced to help.

**Q:** I'll try this method and talk to him.

**I also love to cook, but the holiday meals are always so stressful.**

I like serving traditional food and use recipes that go back decades in my family. My husband thinks we should be serving more trendy things.

Every year, the holiday meals in our house turn into a disaster.

My husband will find weird recipes online and demand that I cook them instead of the turkey or chicken I usually make. This turns into an argument until I tell him to cook the weird food on his own.

He gets upset because he's a terrible cook and doesn't enjoy it. He says I'm not being supportive.

He gets upset because he's a terrible cook and doesn't enjoy it. He says I'm not being supportive. He says I'm not willing to try new things.

**I feel that the holidays are a special moment and deserve traditional food.**

I want my kids to have good memories of their holiday meals. I want my parents and in-laws to enjoy the food instead of wondering what on earth I prepared. I don't want to serve them something trendy or odd.

**How do we stop these silly food fights?**

**A:** Based on what you mentioned, it sounds like you prefer a more traditional holiday while your husband would rather follow the latest trends.

There's nothing wrong with either approach. However, it's causing stress and strife in your family, so it's important to address it.

What matters the most is enjoying whatever meal is prepared with loved ones and appreciating the

What matters the most is enjoying whatever meal is prepared with loved ones and appreciating the food.

Consider compromising with your husband and making one trendy or unique dish for him. You can still prepare the rest of the traditional holiday meal the same way. However, including one dish for him will make him feel like you're listening to his choices.

Ask him to help prepare this dish, but don't abandon him in the kitchen.

You know he struggles to cook, so it's important to help him. Consider having the children join you, so you can start a new family tradition by making one unique dish together for the meal.

**Q: I'm wondering how I can reduce holiday stress in general.**

It seems that whenever the holiday season begins, my stress levels go through the roof! I find myself worrying about everything. I'm busy all the time



worrying about everything. I'm busy all the time and barely have a moment for myself.

**My relationship with my husband always suffers during the holidays.**

He also gets stressed. Plus, he gets upset seeing me stressed out. This even affects our kids.

**What else can we do together as a couple to reduce stress?**

**A:** You have many options to reduce stress during the holidays and preserve your relationship.

**Consider these tried and true ideas:**

- 1. Set aside time to be with your husband.** Pick one or two days on the calendar during the holiday season and make them date nights. This means the children aren't allowed, and you can focus only on each other.

2. **Find a way to stay connected with your husband throughout the holidays.** Whether you send each other sweet text messages or leave behind loving sticky notes in each other's lunches, find a way to keep the love going.
3. **Make your holiday plans clear, but stay flexible.** The holidays are a source of stress for many couples. It's important to have a plan. However, even the best plans can fall apart. Try to stay flexible throughout the holiday season.
4. **Create your own couple ritual for the holidays.** From cooking an unusual or new dish together to buying a special ornament, you can find a variety of ways to create your own couple ritual. Make it fun for both of you!

Finally, keep in mind that the holidays are meant to bring couples and families closer together. Focusing on the main ideas of the season helps you get through the stress of the details.

Good luck to you, and Happy Holidays!