

Coping with Holiday Stress



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Mary has worked at the MDA/ALS Center of Hope as Clinical Nurse Counselor since 2005 and considers it an honor and blessing to help out patients and their loved ones in any way she is able.

The holiday season is characteristically a time of excitement, filled with laughter and gatherings and the hustle and bustle of shopping for gifts. However, when you are adjusting to life with ALS, the holidays can be anything but a season of joy and hope. Living with the disease coupled with the added stress that comes along with the holidays, for some this time of year can become a season of tension, anxiety, and grief.

Whether you are living with ALS yourself, caring for a loved one with the illness, or feeling the loss of someone who has passed away from ALS, this holiday season may present situations when you experience mixed emotions, some more difficult to manage than others. Please consider our tools for coping with holiday stress, outlined on Page 2 & 3. We at the ALS Hope Foundation and the MDA/ALS Center of Hope are here to support you however we can and we wish you many moments where your heart is peaceful and your mind is at ease.

Blessings to you all this holiday season!

Mary Paolone, MSRN

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Tools for Coping with Stress during the Holidays

- ✕ Please remember there is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel...EVER! We simply feel how we feel. What we *do* and *how we cope* with our emotions is what makes all the difference. Continually ask yourself, “How is this coping method serving me? Is it helpful, or not so helpful?”
- ✕ Difficult emotions that are addressed improperly can be expressed in ways that we do not expect, which can be damaging to us and our relationships. This is why it is helpful and important that we try to identify and deal with our uncomfortable feelings before they “come out sideways.”

Acknowledging Emotions

- ✕ Be aware of your personal cues when you are becoming “stressed,” including increased irritability, anxiety, yelling, felling short-tempered, negative thinking, becoming easily frustrated, crying easily and often, becoming controlling of situations and others, shutting down, or withdrawing.
- ✕ Identify your feelings by journaling—writing just a few lines about how you are feeling can help relieve tension. If you use a communication device (i.e., iPad or eyegaze), try expressing yourself using it, and keep it private if you choose.
- ✕ Drawing is effective way to express how you are feeling, and is preferable to some.

Managing Emotions and Coping with Stress

- ✕ **PAUSE and BREATHE**...set aside time for self-reflection throughout your day. Even taking a moment to breathe before reacting to a situation can make a world of difference.
- ✕ **COMMUNICATE**...so many tensions develop due to the lack of basic communication, often about trivial issues. Keep the lines of communication open.
- ✕ **BE PATIENT**...with yourself and with others, especially if ALS has made it difficult for you to communicate as quickly as you would like, if your loved one cannot communicate quickly, or if your loved one cannot understand you as well as you would like.
- ✕ **PRIORITIZE** what you want and need to do. Keep things as simple as possible and set realistic goals for yourself. Be aware that this season may be difficult at various times, so go easy on yourself. Shop online if you are pressed for time.
- ✕ **TRY NOT TO JUDGE** yourself or your loved ones for how they are feeling and coping. We all do this differently, and judging ourselves and others adds to the tension.
- ✕ **CRY** if you need to cry. Often we try to “hold ourselves together” for other people or situations, or because we think “we’re not supposed to cry,” but then those emotions are caught up inside of us. Try to let it out someplace safe, even if you have to excuse yourself to the bathroom for five minutes to do so.

Managing Emotions and Coping with Stress, Continued

- ✕ **TRY NOT TO DWELL** on the negatives—thoughts, feelings, situations—for too long. Give these the necessary space and time to be expressed and managed, then move on with your day.
- ✕ **SHARE** your feelings with someone you feel comfortable with and trust.
- ✕ **KNOW YOUR LIMITS**. There may be situations or conversations that may feel too intense or difficult for you at certain times over the holiday season. Honor your limits and take care of yourself at those times.
- ✕ **MANAGE YOUR EXPECTATIONS** and be mindful that your peace of mind is directly affected by your level of expectation. Normally, the higher the expectation of something or someone, the lower your peace of mind.
- ✕ **FOCUS** on the *good* in your life right now. Make a conscious effort to shift your thinking to more pleasant thoughts.
- ✕ **WRITE** a gratitude list. Even if you do not feel thankful or blessed, this activity can help promote positive thinking.
- ✕ **READ** something inspiring or supportive, like a devotional or self-help book
- ✕ **SMILE** more often. Although it may feel awkward at first, making a conscious effort to smile can shift how you are feeling and how you approach people and situations.
- ✕ **EXERCISE** if you are physically able to or request range of motion. Moving the energy of difficult emotions through the body can be very cleansing and helps open channels for health.
- ✕ **GET OUTSIDE** if possible to experience fresh air and connect with nature.
- ✕ **SOCIALIZE** with supportive friends and family that will bring you enjoyment.
- ✕ **PLAN** an activity to take care of your inner being—massage, yoga, therapy, etc.
- ✕ **PRAY**, meditate, or reach out to a support group or your spiritual community.
- ✕ **ENJOY YOURSELF** by planning a low stress activity, like watching a funny or light hearted movie.
- ✕ **HELP OTHERS** who are in need or less fortunate than you. This can be an amazing and rewarding way to shift your experience and perspective on your own life.
- ✕ Most importantly...**REMEMBER YOU ARE NOT ALONE!**