

10 ways to consider yourself this festive season – ideas for good health during celebrations.13/12/2013.

Whether you are living with a health problem or are just exhausted, techniques that help people manage chronic illness and depression can benefit us all. The demands of family occasions and changed routines - while having enjoyable elements - can also have a negative impact on your health. But how are you at trying to factor this in to your plans? Are you expecting to 'pay' for Christmas in exhaustion, increased pain, feeling worse or even a relapse? Considering some of these areas might help you to reduce the impact.

1) Consider your role

Whether you are the 'quiet one', 'clever one', 'supporter', 'fixer', 'entertainer' or a combination of these, your family role can have an impact on your health. While some things may have changed, it is quite common to try to continue to fulfil roles when unwell - especially supportive ones - even though you may pay a high price in increased symptoms.

If you automatically say 'yes' to requests and invitations without considering whether they are good for you, try this technique to buy yourself a little time: when someone next asks you for something say "I would like to, but need to think about it, can I get back to you?" This allows you to fully consider the impact doing what has been requested might have on you, and work out how to either incorporate your own needs, or explain why you have to say no.

2) Be aware of expectations

Our roles in life are often set early in childhood because of family position and other people's needs. They mean that as well as other people expecting you to behave a certain way, you may have strict ideas about how you 'should' be too. You may feel that if you don't have a big party this year you are being selfish and 'letting everyone down.' But do your loved ones really want your health to suffer for their enjoyment?

Do you really have to attend an event that you don't actually enjoy? Can you arrange some social events more around your own needs? If you are unable to do much in the evening, how would it be to ask to meet your friends during the daytime, or if not possible, earlier?

When preparing others for you to be different it can help to present a new strategy as one step removed from yourself: "I'm trying something new for my health that's been recommended to me/ I read this can really help people with my health problem."

3) Deliberately underestimate yourself

Whether you already use 'pacing', or you are trying something new, it is much harder to keep to the right level of activity outside your usual routine. If you deliberately underestimate what you think you can do - whether it's how long you agree to stay at a party for, how late you plan to stay up, how far you can walk or how long you can shop for before you stop to rest - you allow a bit of leeway so that you are less likely to exceed your stamina levels. Try agreeing to 70% of what you believe you can do, and then stop when you get to this - you will be better able to do other things later.

#### 4) Travel Well

If you have to travel this holiday, consider ways to reduce the impact on your health. Breaking the journey; booking seats; travelling at quieter times; using trains instead of driving; prearranging customer support at airports to reduce standing - there are many ways to travel differently that can reduce the stress and drain on your energy. If you know a journey will take you a day to recover from, is it possible to plan rest time into your schedule?

#### 5) Get rest

Plan regular rest breaks – taking yourself off for some quiet time can actually mean you can stay at an event longer. Could you ask the host beforehand whether there is somewhere you can go to rest? The noise and over-stimulation of Christmas can really affect our energy levels and bodily tension, which can increase pain. Taking time out for yourself is an investment in your enjoyment of the season.

#### 6) Prioritise Sleep

While no one wants to miss a party, getting adequate sleep can mean the difference between having a good day the next day or really suffering. If you have a run of a few nights of poor sleep your health may suffer for some time afterwards.

If you are going to be staying away from home or having people to stay with you over the festive season, consider how you will get quiet and rest. Other people's differing routines and children's night time waking can be difficult for people with chronic health problems. Making sure you have a comfortable bed and some earplugs may involve asserting your needs. While alcohol can get you off to sleep, it prevents the deeper restorative stages of sleep, which can have a negative effect on energy, pain and mood.

#### 7) Eat & drink to be in balance

Eating and drinking more mindfully at Christmas can reduce the impact rich food can have on energy levels, sleep and symptoms. Ask yourself 'do I really want this?' or 'will I feel good after I have this?' before you eat at unusual times or drink more than you usually would – it can really help. Consider keeping small healthy snacks such as unsalted nuts, oatcakes and raw carrots to munch on if your next meal is going to be a while. It can be worth minimizing alcohol if your sleep is adversely affected -the multiple drains of travel, socialising and stress at this time of year don't need more added to them to further disrupt sleep.

#### 8) Know your triggers

What increases your symptoms? Stress impacts on us all, but this can be a dangerous time of year for people with health problems. How are you with: talking for hours; big screen TVs; noise; standing; concentrating for long periods? These can all be a challenge for someone with a health problem and knowing what particularly affects you and finding ways to minimise impact in advance can be a good idea.

Sometimes having a supporter - a partner, friend or colleague who knows and understands a bit about your illness can act as a reminder, especially if you ask them to take that role: 'Could you tell

me if you think I'm overdoing it/look like I need a break?' Get into the habit of focussing on how your body feels every so often - noticing aching legs or fuzzy brain - this can help you to avoid overdoing it.

#### 9) Ask for help

Is it fair that you try to carry on as normal so others can enjoy their holidays if you suffer as a result? Sometimes people are used to us doing certain things and don't realise that they are no longer easy for us. Having chronic health problems means some things become much harder, and this is not your fault. It can help to explain to other people that "because of my \*health problem\*I can't do ..... like I used to, can you help me by.....?"

Asserting your own needs isn't easy, but if it means you come out the other side less ill it is worth the initial discomfort. Can you break tasks into smaller parts and delegate some of them? Gradual change and gentle explanation mean people can start to understand your needs better.

#### 10) Plan longer term changes

Give yourself a gift this year - pay some attention to what you need. Some of these tips may seem simple but the underlying message - that it is not only ok, but vital that we learn to put our needs at the forefront - is hard to do. It can go against how we see ourselves, we can feel that being 'selfish' is wrong, even sinful. If you are struggling with this and feel stuck in your health problem, consider seeing a counsellor who specialises in the impact of physical illness on mental health to help you to make changes that last longer than just this winter.

The truth is that if we make small changes to how we live we can manage our lives better, even improve symptoms and increase energy levels. Rather than being less able to socialise and help others, you can find yourself better able to do so, and with more quality. And if you can do this everyone's a winner! Happy holidays!