

## Take a Stress Vacation This Holiday Season

John J. Parrino, Ph.D

Americans have a love/hate relationship with the holidays. We adore them as an opportunity to divert ourselves from the grind of everyday living, to spend time with loved ones, and to indulge in fattening goodies that are forbidden the rest of the year. But we loathe the festive season when it adds tension to a mind and body already stressed to the max.

In my practice, I teach my clients to recognize stress by – believe it or not - counting "blocks". This exercise can be helpful for recognizing and changing the tension that many of us experience during the holidays.

Start with a scale of zero to 10. The low end of the scale indicates total relaxation; the high end represents panic. You may experience a zero (0) on your scale on a long seaside vacation. On the other end, score a ten (10) if you're visiting the zoo, a gorilla has escaped and he's looking specifically for you.

Let's assume you're loaded up with five blocks of stress simply from everyday living. Now observe what happens when you confront "the season". Add the following stress blocks:

- One for extra shopping.
- One if you plan to travel to spend time with relatives.
- One for financial distress.
- Two for the feeling that your pants are getting tighter.
- Five if you plan to spend time with Uncle Jack, that headstrong, stubborn and controlling relative.

Five (you regular stress level) plus 10, equals 15 (maxed out). By New Year's Day, you'll be ready to run away from home to join the circus.

The de-stress yourself solution is rather simple: You have to (A) start with fewer blocks of stress, and/or (B) learn to subtract stress blocks as they pile up.

The fewer-blocks-of-stress solution is a reasonable option **if** you can do something drastic, such as take a vacation from one of the holidays. In the past five years, my family has opted for this one, and it has worked beautifully. We steal away to the beach for

Thanksgiving, thus easing into December on the lower end of the scale. To execute Option B, you have to be a bit "wicked". I don't mean wicked in the negative or amoral sense, but rather in the sense of being assertive and a little mischievous, willing to say "no" to events and people who demand too much, and "yes" to yourself. Staying balanced can include eliminating the following stress blocks. Subtract:

- One for keeping your shopping down to a reasonable level.
- One if you decide to stay home instead of travel.
- One for conducting a "family meeting" in which you decide together to spend less this holiday season.
- Two if you give yourself permission to allow a little natural tightness in the waistline, thus avoiding the double-digit stress of gaining weight and enormous guilt at the same time.
- Five if you manage to avoid Uncle Jack, the family "stress carrier".

In sum, use the stress-blocks approach to monitor the buildup of holiday stress. Start off with less stress by radically changing your approach to one of the holidays, and make a commitment to subtract one block of stress for every one that you add. Get your family to do the same.

This little exercise may help create the happy and relaxed atmosphere you've always wanted during the holidays.

Dr. John J. Parrino is a Psychologist and author of self help and advice books on stress and relationship issues. Visit his website at [www.drparrino.com](http://www.drparrino.com) for his free online book, Control Freak, and for more helpful information and products on managing stress.