

# The C&A Express

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## **TIPS For A HASSLE FREE HOLIDAY** (OR “HO HO HO, OH NO”)

This issue of the “C&A Express” has been adapted from an article by our affiliate **Bob Lyman, MSED, LCSW**, EAP Coordinator at St. Luke’s Medical Center, serving the Duluth/Superior area.

**As the holiday season approaches, many of us get stirred up by the rapid frenzy that often ensues this time of year.** We lower our guard to self-indulgence and break promises to ourselves. The end result is lower self-esteem and self-respect; depression might even follow. To prevent this kind of downward spiral, you need to be aware of your realities.

We set ourselves up for great disappointments by having great expectations. The best example is what I call the “Walton Mountain Syndrome;” the place where grandpa, grandma, mom, dad, and all the children can always get together and work out any problem—no matter how big.

**Unfortunately, this is not realistic.** Many families don’t see one another until the holidays, sometimes with many years in between. Not having seen one another for years and then expecting to come together for the holidays and “live” as the family you remember from childhood is unrealistic. Many things will have changed, and the stress can be overwhelming if your expectations are too high. Prepare yourself for long nights sleeping on the couch or floor and long waits in the line for the bathroom. Know that Uncle Tom will drink too much and Cousin Don will tell vulgar jokes.

**Expecting to pack a month’s worth of activities into a three-hour time period is also a way to spiral into depression.** I have heard people say, “Let’s see, Johnny’s Christmas play is at 6:00 p.m., then we’re going to go shopping with Joannie, and get home in time to change for our work party. We can do all of that this evening, no problem.”

The problem is that trying to do too much will result in you barely remembering any of the events and certainly prevent you from enjoying them. I like to call it the “Great Paradox.” While the holidays are supposed to be a joyful and jolly time, I find that people are very lonely. They become so busy trying to do and see everything that the anticipated warmth, good cheer and sense of togetherness slips through their fingers.

**During this time of year our “awarenesses” are all on full alert, both to the fond and to the unpleasant memories of this season.** One of my favorite traditions is the *Christmas City of the North* Parade. When that first band goes by playing my favorite Christmas music, I am always tearful. The music of the season brings back all the fond memories of when I was a child. **But it can also bring up bittersweet memories**, like the fact that my mother and father are no longer around to share the holidays, or the relationships that have gone sour. People say things like, “Christmas just isn’t like it used to be when I was a kid, the tree was taller, the snow was deeper,” or, “I’m sure going to miss my old friends this holiday season since our move.” These changes can be difficult to overcome.

**Enough of what your awareness needs to be in terms of the traps over the holiday season!**  
**Let’s talk about what you can do.**

- ∴ **Practice good health habits 12 months out of the year, not just 10 or 11.** Stay away from what I call the “SAD” diet, the Standard American Diet that is high in fats and carbohydrates. Remember the old saying that “Food is love?” This is not always accurate! You cannot get your needs met by intake alone. Exercising in moderation and getting plenty of rest will help you feel better during the holidays, and throughout the year.
- ∴ **Look at your expectations and be realistic.** Don’t set yourself up to fail by starting a new diet on New Year’s Eve, or quitting cigarettes.

**Clearly, you may need to look at these things, but the holidays are probably not the ideal time to start.** Other examples: Is it realistic to go to both parents' homes, or to risk your life driving through a snowstorm to get to the holiday gathering? You can't make everybody equally happy. Don't try to live up to the "Ideal Vision" or try too hard to create an exaggerated sense of joy. I'm not saying you should be a Scrooge, but be yourself.

- .: **Try to be flexible, especially regarding other people.** Remember: unhappiness is the difference between what you expect and what you experience.
- .: **Be reasonable.** The fewer the demands of yourself or your family, the fewer the disappointments. This is a good time to remember Gandhi's words: "There is more to life than increasing its speed."
- .: **Family rituals.** Keep the family strong by creating rich and lasting memories. Try cutting down a Christmas tree together, going to a Kwanzaa celebration, buying candles for the menorah, or decorating the house. Everyone can be given a job to do. These traditions are a great way to teach your values, your ethics, your roots, and your religious beliefs to different generations and share the same experience.
- .: **Learn to say a little word that is so hard to say, especially during the holidays: "No."** Learn to say "No" respectfully, learn to say "No" assertively, but be realistic and honest about what you can and cannot do.
- .: **Communicate, compromise, and schedule.** This may be a good time to put a large calendar of upcoming events on your refrigerator door. Compromise on conflicting issues and tell your spouse about upcoming events so that there are no surprises.
- .: **Plan for "first time" situations.** If you are recently married, realize that there may be some conflict about where you spend Christmas. If you are recently divorced, where are you going to spend the holiday season?

- .: **Be prepared if you have lost a loved one recently.** Be with your family or friends and don't be afraid to reminisce about the good times. To express your feelings is a healthy release, especially around loved ones. To hold it in—to suffer alone—is unhealthy. Sharing brings out the universal truth: we are all human and we all struggle within our lives.
- .: **Emphasize the positive.** Give yourself a pat on the back for the accomplishments you had over the past year. Find the positive parts of the holiday and emphasize them.
- .: **Maintain a comfortable balance and mood.** Distinguish between unhappiness and major depression. Get out in the sun! Going for short walks, skating, skiing, and ice fishing are all great ways to enjoy the outdoors. *[Note to our readers in warm climates: please don't even try to understand how ice fishing can be relaxing!]*
- .: **Call the EAP if the holidays start to get you down. Remember that we're here for you and your family 24 hours a day, every day of the year, at 1-800-742-2858.**

I would like to end on a hopeful note, which may sound contradictory given what I said about being realistic. **But there is magic and a hope during the holiday season that helps us keep in balance.** Back in 1897, the daughter of journalist F.P. Church came home from school crying because she was told there was no Santa Claus. The feeling behind Church's response was universal, whether or not Santa is part of your holiday tradition: "Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by a skepticism of a skeptical age, they only believe in what they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible to their little minds, not believe in Santa Claus? No Santa Claus! Thank God that he lives and he lives forever. A thousand years from now he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

**Happy Holidays to each and every one of you from all of us at the EAP!**

