

Dealing with Difficult Times: Holidays, Financial Crisis, and so on.
Swati Desai, Ph.D., LCSW

Everywhere we turn these days we hear about layoffs, bankruptcies, bailouts and credit crises. It is hard to feel the enthusiasm for the holidays when the fear of the worsening global recession is constantly looming in the background. The bombarding of bad news from so many sources such as newspapers, emails, blogs, TV, cable and radio can be overwhelming and stressful. How does one deal with the stress and the depression of the anticipated difficult times - this financial crisis? How does one make sense of the bad news all around us?

Even without the particularly negative news of 2008, for many people, holidays are known to provoke a stress reaction. Parental criticism, family rivalries, financial pressure and overwhelming obligations all can make holidays distant from the ideal and disappointing. How does one enjoy the holidays to the fullest in spite of these factors? How does one make sense of such stressors?

Here we would like to offer a few tips to reduce the stress from these difficult times. These tips have their origin in the research of crisis decision theory and in Buddhist psychology.

- 1) Start by getting the whole picture before panicking: Stretch the moment between a sinking/stressful feeling and the physical instantaneous reaction to it by getting as much perspective (different sides of the story) as you can. For example, if reading a newspaper story about a family losing their house is about to send you into panic mode, stop and think about the whole picture. Read and listen to hopeful news as well - such as stories about the new economic team and a new economic stimulus package offering hope for better times to come. For every individual story of unemployment and bad news, there is also a story of creative solutions and support from community. Once you keep your eyes and ears open for the “other” perspective, you will get a more complete picture. This typically saves you from instantaneous panic.
- 2) Not too little and not too much: When you are getting the right perspective, remember that just as too much stress can lead to paralysis of action, too little stress (blasé attitude) would also lead to lack of action. Keep this in mind while evaluating and preparing for the situation you are facing. When planning the holiday in your mind, just like the attitude “oh, everything will be fine” could lead to disappointment, overly anxious evaluation would mean canceling or not looking for any solutions. Not thinking and not preparing yourself for facing the family could lead to unplanned regrettable actions, and on the other hand, over anxiety could lead to self-sabotaging behaviors, resulting in “you get what you ask for”. Remember, you want to reduce your stress, not just simply get rid of it by burying your face in sand.
- 3) Be flexible about underlying expectations: The people who deal better with crisis are the ones who readjust their expectations easier than the ones who fall apart. For example, if you are experiencing tight budgets, evaluate if you really do need

as much, or if material things can ever give you the sense of happiness you are looking for. Certain underlying fixed expectations make it difficult not to have material comforts. First is the sense of “entitlement” about what you must have. Second is social comparison. Third is that a person’s value is determined by their display of material wealth. Reevaluating such fixed expectations and letting go of the ones that do not make sense is a useful skill. Be stubborn about values not about expectations.

This is particularly true when it comes to dealing with family situations. When you are dealing with human beings expecting rigid “shoulds” about their behavior provokes misery. Understand the difference between “values” and “expectations”.

Be strong in values but flexible in expectations.

- 4) Prioritize, don’t shut down: When things seem difficult, a common defense is to totally withdraw. For example, the news of recession may generate fear of any spending. This may mean experience of guilt over every dollar spent. Instead, prioritize what is important for keeping you healthy and happy, after reevaluating the expectations. Instead of instant gratifications, choose long-term resource building. You may decide that it would be OK to cut down on eating out and choose to spend the resources on taking the writing class you have been wanting to. Instant gratification can come from a simple cup of coffee by the oceanfront, but long term health and resource building will require reallocation of current resources.
- 5) Beware of self-blame: Crisis situation is not the time to blame yourself for what happened. Research shows that people who self-blame in crisis are less likely to look for solutions. For example, the financial crisis is not the time to immerse yourself in self-blame that you did not save enough when the times were good or that you are a failure because of misjudgments. After the crisis is stabilized, self-exploration and learning can be done, but not during the crisis.

Notice the difference between self-blame and self-awareness. Especially during family situations, it is useful to be self-aware of your contribution to a difficult situation, and to be empathic to the other family members; however, actions out of self-blame and guilt will foster long term anger and resentment, instead of harmony.

- 6) Foster searching for solutions: When a problem arises, remember that there are always solutions and your job is to keep searching for them. It may take time to actually find one, but solutions are always floating around any difficult situation. If you are stressed out about facing a difficult situation, think about talking to people in a similar situation or about doing an activity that would give you short term relief. If you cannot buy expensive gifts for your family, consider gifts that can be made special by adding personal handmade touches. The research on crisis decision making shows that making no decision is worse than making a wrong decision. This implies that it is important to keep active searching for the next action.
- 7) Offer support: If you are the lucky one who at the moment is not facing either financial crisis or a dysfunctional family situation, be there for the less fortunate

ones. There are stories about how extended families decided to share houses to make it easy for them both. If you are worried about your own situation, giving support can still come in the form of empathy, listening, and sharing information about resources. Going beyond self-concern, and helping someone else who needs help, is a remedy for anxiety and depression.

- 8) Non-attach and then enjoy the moment: Most stress comes from either regretting past actions or anticipating future disaster. This makes it more difficult to follow any of the above tips. The current moment is what you have for sure, whether you are using it for efforts to avoid the future disaster or simply having a cup of water by the window. The procedure for non-attachment in any difficult situation is the following: first know what you want in the future, second begin to put in the best effort you can for getting there, and third non-attach from the results! Although it sounds difficult to put in your best effort, and yet not to be desperate for the fruits, once you decide to do it, it may not be so hard. Buddhist psychology believes in using meditation to train people to observe without getting desperately attached to the underlying feelings. This training is very useful, especially during difficult times and difficult emotions.

Aronson, Henry, B., *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground*, Shambhala, Boston and London, 2004, pp 163-183

Sweeny, Kate, Crisis Decision Theory: Decisions in the Face of Negative Events. *Psychological Bulletin*. 134(1): pp 61-76, January 2008.