

## Surviving the Holidays: Strategies for Caregivers

by Eileen Beal

The eight-week stretch between Thanksgiving and New Years is the most stressful time of the year for those caring for elderly relatives or others who can not live on their own.

The stress isn't just due to the holiday activities—shopping for gifts, baking, addressing and sending out holiday cards, organizing transportation for holiday expeditions, etc.—that take up additional time and add additional responsibilities to a caregiver's already packed life. It's also, says Stacey Rokoff, the director of the School for Caregivers at Fairhill Center on Cleveland's near East Side, due to the fact "that holiday time is family time and when family members come together there are a lot of challenges to the caregiver about how they are doing their job;" and to the fact that the weather "is 'iffy,' and that makes doing everything more difficult;" and to the fact that the "work and family schedules and care routines that enable caregivers to keep all the balls in the air are disrupted during the holidays."

"It's no surprise," adds the social worker, "that caregivers say they *feel* overwhelmed, out of control and out of patience during the holidays. They *are*."

Nothing can stop the disruptive impact the holidays have on a caregiver's life, admits Rokoff, but planning for the physical, emotional, and fiscal upheaval that comes with them can definitely help caregivers survive them.

Rokoff, with several years of helping stressed-out caregivers survive the holidays under her belt, suggests the following strategies for weathering whatever the "festive season" throws your way.

1. **Make a holiday to-do list/calendar**—including family gatherings, parties, kids or grandkid's programs, due-dates for getting cards and gifts into the mail, getting holiday goodies baked, etc.—then figure out which activities you should do and which ones you can delegate to the folks in item number 2.
2. **Put together a support network** "Make a list—family, friends, community agencies and service providers—and get comfortable delegating," says Rokoff.
3. **Learn to say no** "This isn't selfish, it's self-empowering," says Rokoff. "If you don't, you and the person you are caring for will be so exhausted you won't be able to enjoy things."
4. **Don't aim for perfection** "Be flexible and when you need to, change your expectations to fit a situation. That way, you aren't disappointed or guilt-ridden...[and] you actually gain the time and the energy to participate in things and enjoy them," says Rokoff.
5. **Maintain your health** Don't skip medications or medical appointments; exercise; and eat and drink to sustain energy, but avoid rich foods, sugar, and alcohol. All boost energy for a bit, then leave you burned out.
6. **Find a de-stressing mechanism** "For some people, it's deep breathing, for some it's meditating, for others it's humor, or journaling or scrapbooking," says Rokoff.
7. **Don't forget immediate family** "Neglecting them adds to feelings of guilt, so plan time to be in the moment with them, to celebrate with them, to participate in activities and traditions just with them," says Rokoff. "This isn't selfish, it's life-affirming."

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*Eileen Beal, MA, is healthcare writer specializing in geriatric issues. Successful Aging is provided by Benjamin Rose (www.benrose.org), a non-profit social service agency for older adults.*

For more information on surviving the holidays, consult:

**Websites:**

Caregiver Survival Resources [www.caregiver911.com](http://www.caregiver911.com)

Fairhill Center Caregiver Program [www.fairhillcenter.org](http://www.fairhillcenter.org)

National Alliance for Caregivers [www.caregiving.org](http://www.caregiving.org)

National Family Caregivers Association [www.nfcacares.org](http://www.nfcacares.org)

**Books:**

*Baby Boomers Guide to Caring for Aging Parents*, Bart Astor

*Caring for You, Caring for Me*, David H. Haigler

*Self-Care for Caregivers*, Pat Samples, Diane Larsen, Marvin Larsen

*Why Is It So Hard to Take Care of My Parent?* , Linda Meyer