The holidays offer plenty of reasons to be stressed out and anxious -- the gifts you haven’t wrapped, the pile of cookie exchange invites, the office parties. But for many, the biggest source of holiday stress is family &/or friends -- the family &/or friends get together, the obligations, and the burden of some of these holiday traditions. And if you’re fighting clinical depression or anxiety, or have had depression or anxiety in the past, the holiday stress can be a trigger for more serious problems.

“There’s this idea that holiday gatherings with family are supposed to be joyful and stress-free,” says Ken Duckworth, MD, medical director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. “That’s not the case. Family relationships are complicated. But that’s doesn’t mean that the solution is to skip the holidays entirely.”

With holiday family reunions looming in your calendar, what are some ways that you can prepare yourself and cope better this season?

Here are some tips on beating holiday stress and anxiety:

**Change your outlook.** Draw up a list of reasons why you engage in these holiday traditions, and then a list of reasons why you shouldn’t. Just making a simple pro and con list will remind you that you do have a choice. Then, make healthy decisions about what to invest your time in.

The next step is to **challenge some of your assumptions.** If you enjoyed the holidays differently this year, what would happen? Try something new. Toss out stressful activities.

The key is to **be conscious about what you’re doing.** This holiday season, don’t unthinkingly do things the same way just because that’s how you always do them.
Don’t expect miracles. If your holiday anxiety stems from a deeper history of family conflict, don’t expect that you’ll be able to resolve any big underlying issues now. You may be better off focusing on your own state of mind and confronting difficult issues during a less volatile time of year.

Don’t overdo it. To reduce holiday stress, you have to pace yourself. Don’t overcommit or overspend, eat or drink too much. Find some downtime just for you. Ask for help &/or delegate, as able.

Leave politics at the door. The recent election is at the top of everyone’s mind. Recognize that strong opinions exist among friends and family and can cause severe conflict. Deflect, avoid, or minimize the political dialogue. Bring up safe go-to discussion topics like recent or upcoming vacations, new movies of interest or great places to dine or shop.

Don’t worry about how things should be. There is a lot of cultural pressure during the holidays. We tend to compare ourselves with these idealized notions of perfect families and perfect holidays. But in fact, most people have less than perfect holiday gatherings -- they have family tension, melancholy, and dry turkey too. If you have negative feelings, don’t try to deny them. Acknowledge the discomfort & commit to working on that after the holidays.

Manage your expectations. Inoculate yourself from being disappointed by having reasonable goals for the holiday season. Anticipate that some things will work out as hoped and some might not go according to your anticipated plans. Everything passes. Nothing is permanent.

Focus on what matters. Stop to acknowledge. Be present and mindful of your life and all in it that you are grateful for. Appreciate all that is positive and remain open to the possibilities.

If you or your family member need support during the holiday season, please call the Office of Employee Assistance at 305-248-2469 and let us be of help.