Reducing Holiday Stress to Enjoy Christmas

by SHARON DAVIS

Getting Through Christmas With Bipolar

It was the first holiday season in my new home and I was torn. Part of me wanted to do it up right with lots of decorations, rich foods, and an unending list of guests, many of whom would come from out of town.

The guest list even included people who represented emotional triggers in my life. This is what everyone expected; after all, I now had a great house located in a city accessible to many of my relatives. It only seemed reasonable for me to serve as the hostess this year.

But there was another part of me — drenched in realism and a disregard for the expectations of others — that demanded I listen to my inner voice and get real with myself. The truth was that the last four months had been lived at a hectic pace. I had a new job with new responsibilities and worked through the hoops of home ownership. I was exhausted and all I wanted was a movie marathon in my jammies.

As the holidays grew closer I caved to the expectations of others. I put up special decorations befitting of my new home. I made special arrangements for Christmas dinner, and even borrowed a few extra tables from a friend to accommodate all of my guests. And I put up my very first real Christmas tree. Sure, I had had little fake trees in the past, but nothing like this fine Douglas fir that now adorned my living room.

In a word, everything was perfect — until my guests started showing up and ignoring all of my well-made plans. To be clear, not all of my plans had been articulated — some remained in my head and had not been shared with my guests.

But whether or not I had articulated the plan, things were going awry. Instead of things going the way I wished, they went by a random assortment of ways that reflected my guests' whims and desires.

Wearing Me Down

This conflict within kept wearing me down. I couldn't enjoy my holiday and often withdrew, in my jammies, while my guests entertained themselves. It unnerved me to see my guests having a better time than I did. How was that fair?

I literally counted down the days until my guests left, and once they did I was rewarded with a full-fledged head cold with all of the aches, pains and inconveniences.

I felt so weak and defeated, I vowed I would never repeat that fiasco again. Just when I thought it was all over, I found myself escalating into my first manic episode.

Lessons Learned

That first episode was 12 years ago and I have learned many lessons since then:

- **This is your holiday season, so take control of it.** As you look at the weeks comprising the holiday season, start envisioning how you would like to spend this time.
- **What are your priorities?** Who must you see? Are there people you could see another time?
- **Which people trigger you?** How can you make a plan to minimize your time around these people?
- **Make a budget of both your time and your money.** Sticking to these budgets will make you feel better and help you get through the holidays with ease.
- **Be honest — if you don't want to be the hostess, let people know.** Twelve years ago if I had been honest with my family I still may have hosted the holiday, but I would have set a different expectation.
- **Give yourself a way out.** Make appointments with your therapist, have special one-on-one time with a friend, or take yourself out on a date. Or in my case, spend some time in your jammies.

More About Bipolar and the Holidays

The holiday season can trigger a full menu of bipolar symptoms:

- **Over-stimulation:** Over-committed days and nights fueled by coffee and sugary treats can lead to lack of sleep and start the vicious manic cycle. Take this very seriously — take medication as directed and if hypomania continues, see your psychiatrist.
- **Over-spending:** Even a carefully disciplined spender can be thrown off by the appeal to buy more and save more. To avoid overspending, set a spending limit and reinforce by sharing this with a buddy who can keep you on track.
- **Depression:** The holidays can be a lonely time remembering lost loved ones and other painful memories. Some people long to avoid the holidays; if this is you, speak to a counselor — you might be able to find alternatives to a traditional holiday.
- **Anxiety:** Many times we must socialize with people we do not know well, and this can cause social anxiety. If you anticipate the anxiety, make sure to give yourself an escape clause that allows you to leave early if need be.