

Handling Holiday Stress Workshop
December 15, 2011

1. Diaphragmatic Breathing Exercise
2. Introduction: Have the group members introduce themselves and tell why they have attended the workshop
3. Basic tips for handling holiday stress
4. Communication: Basic tips on effective communication
5. Assertiveness: Basic assertiveness training
6. Relaxation Techniques
 - a. Deep Breathing
 - b. Exercise
 - c. Progressive Muscle Relaxation
7. Question and Answer: Use time to process individual questions and fears over the holidays.
8. Murney Clinic: Discuss therapy through the Robert J. Murney Clinic and services available through the GLO center.

Basic Tips for Handling Holiday Stress

1. **Acknowledge your feelings:** It is okay to take time to cry or express your feelings. Don't force yourself to be happy just because it is the holiday season... this will add more stress
2. **Be realistic:** Holidays don't have to be perfect. It is not necessary to love everything about your family, or their traditions. People are not black and white, good or bad. For most families, they are good people who may be guilty of doing some not so good things.
3. **Establish your place:** Why do you visit your family? Is it because you want to, or out of a sense of obligation?
4. **Plan ahead:** Know what you are going into. The advantage of rituals and predictable behavior is that you can at least anticipate them and make a plan.
 - a. **Set limits for yourself and have an escape plan:** If things get too stressful, have plans to escape. This may include leaving the room occasionally, to call a friend or check your Facebook. You could also choose to engage with nieces and nephews as a "time out." It may even include skipping certain events, but be sure to discuss this hours or days earlier.
 - b. **Make a List:** prepare yourself for comments that might be said, and how you can respond. Know what you will not tolerate and how to respond to that as well. For example: If Aunt Agatha innocently asks if you're dating, your response should show no signs of weakness or defensiveness. If she doesn't like when your answer is "His name is Mike, and he's an accountant," remember, it is her issue, not yours.
5. **Set Aside Differences:** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't completely live up to your expectations... Chances are they are feeling the holiday stress too.
6. **Stick to a Budget:** before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much you can afford to spend, and stick to this.
7. **Don't Abandon Healthy Habits:** Overindulgence only adds to the stress. Stress can have physiological effects. So take time to exercise, even if it is a little walk. Don't skimp on the sleep. All of these can increase stress and result in negative moods.
8. **Reach Out:** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out a friend, community, religious or other social events. Volunteering time can also help lift your spirits and broaden friendships.
9. **Seek Professional Help if Needed:** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling sad or anxious, if these feelings continue, call a mental health professional or your doctor.





Assertiveness

- Assertiveness can help you control stress and anger, as well as cope with stress.
- **Assertive:** being able to express yourself effectively and stand up for your core beliefs.
 - Based on mutual respect
 - Not just what you say, but how you say it: Assertive communication is direct and respectful. If you are too passive or too aggressive, your message may get lost because people are too busy reacting to your delivery.
- **Assertive vs. Passive**
 - Passive behavior may come off as shy or overly easygoing
 - If you are more passive you may tend to avoid conflict—you may unintentionally send the message that your thoughts and feelings aren't as important as those around you. This may give people the license to disregard your wants and needs.
- **Assertive vs. Aggressive**
 - If you have a more aggressive style, you may be seen as a bully who disregards the needs, feelings and opinions of others. You may think this is how you get what you want, but it tends to undercut others trust and respect for you... and they may come to resent you.
- **Assertive vs. Passive-Aggressive**
 - If this is more your style, you may say yes when you want to say no. You may be sarcastic or complain about others behind their backs... this may have developed because you are uncomfortable being direct about your needs.
 - Over time, this may damage relationships, and make it difficult to get your goals and needs met
- **Benefits of Learning Assertive Communication**
 - Gain self-confidence and self-esteem
 - Help you to understand and recognize your feelings
 - Earn respect from others
 - Improve communication
 - Create win-win situations
 - Improve decision-making skills
 - Create honest relationships
 - Gain more job satisfaction
- **How to be more Assertive:**
 - **Assess your style:** Know your current communication style before you begin to make changes
 - **Use "I Statements:"** Lets others know what you are thinking without sounding accusatory. I.E. I disagree rather than You're wrong.

- **Practice Saying No:** If you have a hard time, try “No, I can’t take that on right now.” Don’t beat around the bush... keep explanations brief.
- **Rehearse what you want to say:**
- **Use Body Language:** Communication isn’t just verbal. Keep an upright posture, but lean forwards a bit. Practice making eye contact and maintain a neutral or positive facial expression. You may need to practice this in front of the mirror.
- **Keep Emotions in Check:** If you feel too emotional during a situation, try to wait a bit before going into a situation. Breathe slowly and work on remaining calm.
- **Start Small:** Start by practicing in situation’s that are low risk... For instance, try this out on a partner or friend before attempting it at work. Evaluate yourself, or ask for feedback, and change your approach if necessary.

Tips for a Happy Holiday for GLBT

*Some tips excerpted from Mariana Caplan's book, When Holidays are Hell...! A Guide to Surviving Family Gatherings. Published by Hohm Press.

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

If you are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender...

- Don't assume you know how somebody will react to news of your sexual orientation or gender presentation- you may be surprised.
- Realize that your family's reaction to you may not be because you are gay, lesbian, trans or bisexual. The hectic holiday pace may cause family members to act differently than they would under less stressful conditions.
- Remember that "coming out" is a continuous process. You may have to "come out" many times.
- Don't wait for your family's attitude to change to have a special holiday.
- Recognize that your parents, family members and old friends need time to acknowledge and accept that they have a gay, lesbian, trans or bisexual child. It took you time to come to terms with your sexual orientation and gender presentation, now it is your family's turn. Consider the length of time it took you to "Come Out" and multiple that time by 2 or 3. It will take at least this long for your family to get used to your "Coming Out".
- Let your family's judgments be theirs to work on, as long as they are kind to you.
- Create your own holiday gathering with friends and loved ones, if it is too difficult to be with your family.

BEFORE THE VISIT...

- Make a decision about being "out" to each family member before you visit.
- Discuss in advance with your partner or girlfriend/boyfriend how you will talk about your relationship, or show affection with one another, if you plan to make the visit together.
- Don't wait until late into the holiday evening to raise the issue of sleeping arrangements. If you bring your partner home, make plans in advance.
- Have alternate plans if the situation becomes difficult at home.
- Find out about GLBT resources in the area.
- If you do plan to "come out" to your family over the holidays, have support available.

DURING THE VISIT...

- Focus on common interests.
- Reassure family members that you are still the same person they have always known.
- Be sensitive to your partner's needs as well as your own.
- Be wary of the possible desire to shock your family.
- Remember to affirm yourself.
- Realize that you don't need your family's approval to sustain an excellent relationship with your partner.
- Connect with someone else who is gay, lesbian, trans or bisexual- by phone, email or in person - who understands what you are going through and will affirm you along the way.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

(Handout 2)

The diaphragm is the most efficient muscle of breathing. It is a large, dome-shaped muscle located at the base of the lungs. Your abdominal muscles help move the diaphragm and give you more power to empty your lungs.

Diaphragmatic breathing is intended to help you use the diaphragm correctly while breathing to:

- Strengthen the diaphragm
- Decrease the work of breathing by slowing your breathing rate
- Decrease oxygen demand
- Use less effort and energy to breathe

Diaphragmatic breathing technique

1. Lie on your back on a flat surface or in bed, with your knees bent and your head supported. You can use a pillow under your knees to support your legs. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. This will allow you to feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.



2.

Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should remain as still as possible.

3. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible.



When you first learn the diaphragmatic breathing technique, it may be easier for you to follow the instructions lying down. As you gain more practice, you can try the diaphragmatic breathing technique while sitting in a chair, as shown below.

To perform this exercise while sitting in a chair:

1. Sit comfortably, with your knees bent and your shoulders, head and neck relaxed.



2. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. This will allow you to feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.

3. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible.

Note: You may notice an increased effort will be needed to use the diaphragm correctly. At first, you'll probably get tired while doing this exercise. But keep at it, because with continued practice, diaphragmatic breathing will become easy and automatic.

How often should I practice this exercise?

At first, practice this exercise 5-10 minutes about 3-4 times per day. Gradually increase the amount of time you spend doing this exercise, and perhaps even increase the effort of the exercise by placing a book on your abdomen.

progressive muscle relaxation

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. This can result in feeling "tense", or can lead to muscle aches and pains, as well as leaving some people feeling exhausted. Think about how you respond to anxiety. Do you "tense up" when you're feeling anxious? Muscle relaxation can be particularly helpful in cases where anxiety is especially associated to muscle tension. This information sheet will guide you through a common form of relaxation designed to reduce muscle tension.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

One method of reducing muscle tension that people have found helpful is through a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

preparing for relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

general procedure

- 1 Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- 2 When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- 3 Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- 4 When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. **Left hand and forearm.**
4. **Left upper arm.**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as though you were surprised by something.
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. **Neck. !!!** Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. **Shoulders.** Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh.
14. **Right lower leg. !!!** Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards.
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means progress. Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.