

## Holiday Overwhelm

Written by Glen Hogard  
Wednesday, 21 December 2011 08:56

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"I feel it now. It's only the 19th of December, but my mind is already manufacturing anxiety in anticipation of decreasing structure and increasing variables (thank you, Chuck Parker for the framing)." I did a bit of searching after being asked to write an article on ADHD and the holidays with the purpose of lessening the increased stress for those with the "trash basket" diagnosis of ADHD.

I use the term, "trash basket", for the diagnosis taught me by a friend, Thom Hartmann, because there is no single thing that truly defines the ADHD diagnosis as it is now applied. If it's not "this" and it's not "that" and the person presents a certain way, then it must be ADHD so it's tossed into the ADHD (trash) basket. Yes, it's sorted like so much recycled material into glass, paper, or metal, but no one basket is the same. All of us are different, yet similar in a recognisable way.

It is not the case that every person with ADHD has more difficulty coping with "the holidays" than any other person. But it does seem to be that those who react negatively to increased complications and variables, generally have more difficulty, and as a group, ADHD – brained people fall into that category.

For convenience and a generally descriptive handle let's refer to these people as laterally thinking or "laterals" as opposed to the majority of the population who can be loosely classed by comparison as linear thinkers, or "linears". It's not necessary to go into a careful definition of characteristics of people in these two categories. The people reading this article will know what I mean by those terms.

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Also, for brevity's sake, I'm going to jump right into the symptoms and solutions or accommodations that can be made by the laterals, to buffer the stress caused by the real or perceived chaos, that many feel during any gathering of the family, but most especially the winter solstice holidays including Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.

### **Practice Extreme Self Care**

More than any other advice or tip possible, paying extra attention to the situations, conditions, or feelings that cause laterals to become overloaded, overtired, hungry, angry, or overwhelmed in any way, is the one thing within our power that can serve us best. Practising extreme self care is the most powerful way to insure we have the best possible holiday experience with the fewest negative consequences.

Those four words, practice extreme self care, are easy to say, but oh so difficult to put into practice. If we fail to maintain some sort of balance between the demands put on us by others, by situations beyond our control, or most devious, those expectations we place on ourselves: often unconsciously we can become overwhelmed. The damnable irony is whenever there is a battle between the conscious and unconscious, the unconscious always wins: always. So we normally have no defense in those situations.

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It's because self-imposed stress is unconscious that it will "blindsides" you. You think you are prepared for Uncle Farquhar to get drunk again and say or do something that will make you wish you were a thousand miles away, but when it happens, your emotions suddenly go from 0 to 1000 in an instant and you feel out of control.

Or someone may ask you to help or do that "one more thing" which suddenly, in an instant, sends you reeling out of control with feelings of being overwhelmed. It may be the crowd of people, the rapidly changing situations, or having to deal with all the strange personalities, conflicts and emotions surrounding you that send your mind reeling. There may be forgotten bad memories or family feuds, creating icy stares between people around you and there you are, in the middle, caught in the crossfire verbally or physically feeling very uncomfortable.

This is the time you wish, as Steve Martin used to put it, you could "get small". You feel out of control; unable to think clearly and unable to rationally deal with whatever situation surrounds you be it personal or an icy atmosphere in the room generally. This is the time to act: to put into action your pre-planned escape!

"What do I mean, escape," you ask? "I can't escape – I'm trapped and rapidly losing it!"

One phrase; taught me at OFI over a decade ago – "Boggle Space" can save you. This is a

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space, hopefully pre-planned, where you can go quickly by excusing yourself immediately before overwhelm morphs into out of control. This boggle space could be a restroom, a bedroom, the backyard, your car, or anywhere you can be alone.

While there, take steps to actively calm down. Take some deep breaths, relax as much as possible and generally take five to ten minutes to gather your thoughts and emotions so you can re-enter the group situation calmly with a plan to deal with a situation which a few minutes earlier had sent you over the edge of control or comfort.

Maybe it was a situation which had been too much to handle and had perhaps paralysed you into inaction, or it might have driven you to the verge of a wild outburst of emotion, which in other times would have left you embarrassed or feeling guilty for overacting inappropriately; seemingly out of control.

Those normal reactions to your experience of overwhelming stress would have verified to those who know you, that you have a brain difference; made all the more real by your overreaction.

This serves to validate their perception of you as the "identified patient" or the one with that "weirdness" of the ADHD person in the family. Of course, many of them don't realise that it's genetic and that there is a good chance that they themselves might have similar brain chemistry. The irony is, what they hate most in themselves, they project onto you and are then emotionally free to hate it in you. Psychologists call this projection.

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Almost by default, gatherings of a family with ADHD genes present, many of them undiagnosed and untreated, will have those situations and people who are a bit on the extremes of behaviour. We do extremes very well. That can be a good thing but at holiday time usually not.

My point is this: once you've taken the usual steps to reduce the demands on yourself as best you can, (i.e. not cooking the entire holiday dinner, not comparing this holiday to the fantasy one of youth which never really happened the way we have idealised it,) and have set some healthy boundaries whatever they may be, you may still find yourself caught in one of those startle response moments when you are caught off guard like the deer in the headlights: unable to move or think.

This is when you put your plan into action, excuse yourself for a moment and pull it back together: head for bathroom, bedroom, car or other solitary quiet space. Then you can reemerge refreshed with a plan to move on to a less stressful conversation, address the situation intelligently, or return with your calm center intact; ready to remain non-reactive instead of over reactive. In the final analysis, everyone will benefit.

Glen