

Using The “Cognitive Therapy for the Holidays” Worksheet To Reduce Your Holiday Stress

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Try a little cognitive therapy to reduce your holiday stress. Cognitive therapy examines the thoughts and beliefs that lead to feelings, and thus to behavior. Everyone has some cognitive distortions which are irrational ideas, thoughts, or beliefs, that get in the way of optimal functioning. People acquire these cognitive distortions in many ways, including family of origin, cultural norms or biases, and personal experiences. Cognitive distortions are often a major symptom of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety disorders, and personality disorders. The things that we believe color how we take in the information in our lives. Our beliefs shape or distort the meaning that we give to events, interactions, and perceptions.

Many people with anxiety disorders and depression benefit tremendously from cognitive therapy. Since the holiday season is known for increases in bouts of anxiety, depression, and suicide, a little cognitive therapy can serve as the proverbial “ounce of prevention”.

When you can realize that the reality is different from your beliefs, you can stop wasting your time upsetting yourself. You can then be more free to enjoy the holidays, thoughtfully picking and choosing the activities that you want to engage in, purchasing (or not purchasing) according to your budget and your own desires, and setting your priorities based on your own values and interests.

The Cognitive Therapy for the Holidays Worksheet

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The ideas below are a take-off from Albert Ellis’ Irrational Ideas that have been extended to reflect cognitive distortions about the holidays. Circle the number of the irrational ideas that you buy into (to any degree).

1. You must buy the gifts that your loved ones have told that they want. It does not matter whether or not you can afford them.
2. You must visit both sets of in-laws on Christmas Day, even if it wears everyone out.
3. Your gift should be liked and approved of by everyone.
4. You should always say “yes” when asked to help others with something or to get together with others.
5. When you spend money that is not on your budget, it does not count when it is Christmas presents--because you spent the money on someone else.

6. You must rehearse everything in your mind that could go wrong or it will go wrong.
7. Some people are socially inept and must be monitored and tutored on how to behave. It is your job to monitor and correct them.
8. Christmas only comes once a year. You can let your exercise, eating right, and the excellent self-care you have developed over the year slide, to dash around getting “things done”.
9. It is awful and terrible when the holidays not the way you would very much like them to be.
10. The holidays are a roller coaster. You just get on for the ride. There is nothing you can do to increase your enjoyment of it or reduce your stress about it.
11. You must take your cues from your neighbors, the advertisements, and the magazines about how to decorate, what to serve for get-togethers, and what gifts to buy. Your own judgement is insufficient.
12. There is invariably a perfect gift for each person on your purchase list. It would be a terrible tragedy if their perfect gift is not found.
13. It is disloyal to experience joy or have fun on the holidays when other people that you know are suffering with loss or sadness.

Now ask yourself the following questions about each item. Here is an example of what this might look like:

Item number 12

- 1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this? *No*
- 2) Where did I get this belief? *Mom drove herself crazy every year trying to find the “perfect gift” for everyone.*
- 3) What impact does having this belief have on my feelings, stress or self-esteem? *I feel incompetent or that I am not a good friend, mother, or spouse, when I don’t automatically know what the perfect gift is for each person.*
- 4) What impact does having this belief have on my finances or other real outcomes (including relationships)? *I feel hurt when the people I buy gifts for don’t convince me that they really like the gift.*
- 5) What is a rational replacement thought or belief for this item? *There is no perfect gift for my loved ones. There are thoughtful gifts that I can feel good about giving.*

Identify your own cognitive challenges here:

Item number ____

- 1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this?
- 2) Where did I get this belief?
- 3) What impact does having this belief have on my feelings, stress or self-esteem?
- 4) What impact does having this belief have on my finances or other real outcomes (including relationships)?
- 5) What is a rational replacement thought or belief for this item?

Item number ____

- 1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this?
- 2) Where did I get this belief?
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Item number ____

- 1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this?
- 2) Where did I get this belief?
- 3) What impact does having this belief have on my feelings, stress or self-esteem?

4) What impact does having this belief have on my finances or other real outcomes (including relationships)?

5) What is a rational replacement thought or belief for this item?

Item number ____

1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this?

2) Where did I get this belief?

3) What impact does having this belief have on my feelings, stress or self-esteem?

4) What impact does having this belief have on my finances or other real outcomes (including relationships)?

5) What is a rational replacement thought or belief for this item?

Feel free to add any other irrational ideas that you may be harboring that have a negative impact on your holiday experience.

My own irrational idea:

1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this?

2) Where did I get this belief?

3) What impact does having this belief have on my feelings, stress or self-esteem?

4) What impact does having this belief have on my finances or other real outcomes (including relationships)?

5) What is a rational replacement thought or belief for this item?

My own irrational idea:

1) Is this a universal truth. Does everyone believe this?

2) Where did I get this belief?

3) What impact does having this belief have on my feelings, stress or self-esteem?

4) What impact does having this belief have on my finances or other real outcomes (including relationships)?

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