



# Stress, Planning, and Deep Breaths:

## Unwrapping the Holiday Season

By **Chris Abildgaard, EdD, NCSP, LPC**

---

WHEN YOU THINK OF THE HOLIDAYS, WHAT IS THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO MIND? FOR ME, IT'S BEING HOME WITH MY FAMILY, SPECIAL BREAKFASTS, TRYING NOT TO LET THE HOUSE GET TOO MESSY, AND (ESPECIALLY WHEN THE KIDS WERE YOUNGER) OVER-PLANNING AND CREATING UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR THE DAY. LET'S BE HONEST, WE ALL HAVE BEEN THERE, THINKING THE DAY OR HOLIDAY BREAK WILL BE ONE WAY, AND IT'S TOTALLY NOT.

---

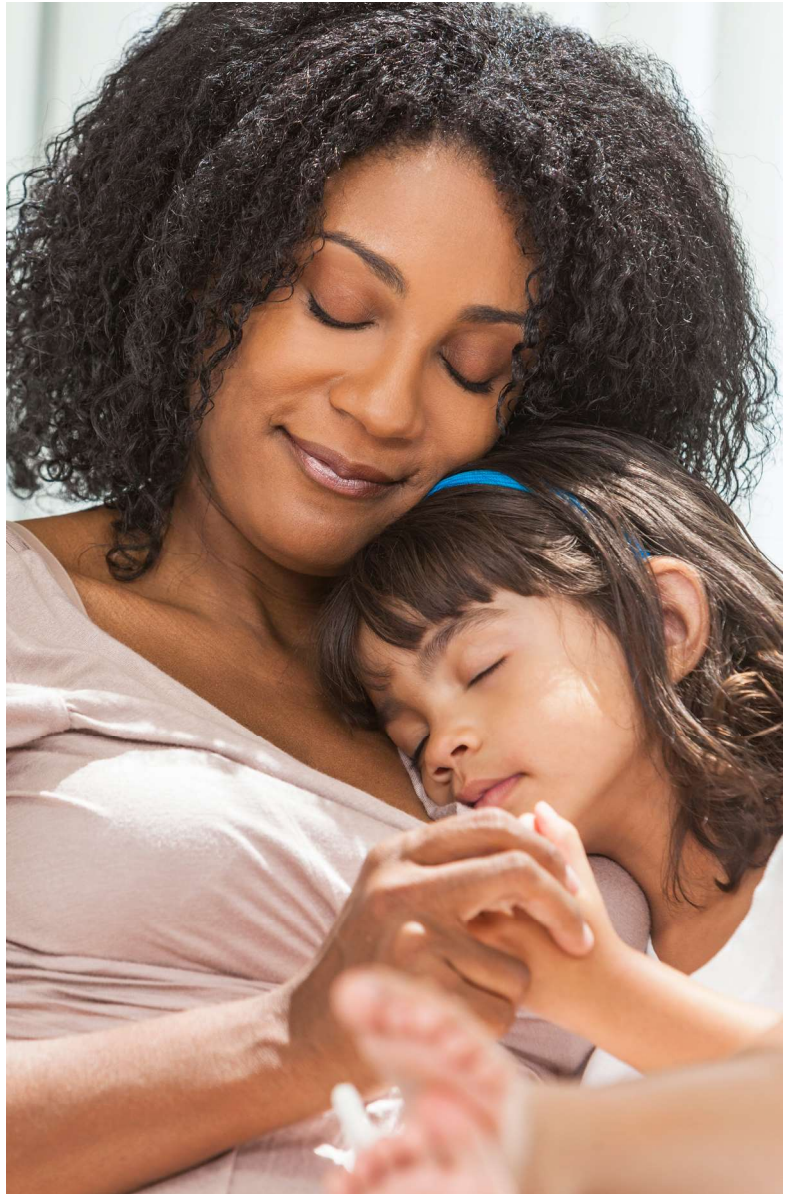
We go into these big times of the year with a thought, or maybe a vision. Perhaps we share that thought with others (maybe we don't), and then a glitch occurs that derails us, our kids, and the whole family unit. I wish I can say that will never happen again. The one thing the past year and a half taught me to do was reflect on, "How do we prepare for the unexpected, how do we cope with stress when all eyes are on us, and how can we make a difficult situation a learning moment in time?"

Even though it may not feel like it, we are all better at preparing for the unexpected. Even for some of our clients and students who have a hard time with shifting or being flexible, I have seen a shift in how they handle things. We may not always like the shift in plans; however, we are getting used to it to some degree. I do believe consistency, predictability, and routine are critical things for many of the clients and students we work with. Honestly, those aspects of life are important for everyone as there is a level of comfort in those life structures. Yet when we must shift and change our expectations or plan, it brings about a level of stress for professionals, parents, and our clients/kids.

How do we deal with the possible stress that creeps up on us when a shift is needed? I talk about hitting it "head-on." Talk about the shift, why it is needed, the fact that you will be "okay," after, and why the shift may be helpful

An example that came up in my family's house last holiday was around our Christmas morning breakfast. For all the years my oldest daughter can remember, we always had her grandma's French toast bread on Christmas. After the year we all had, she was really looking forward to it. Her expectations were that this past year would be like any other, and she would have her French toast bread. Christmas morning, her grandmother called and said she was sick and had to get a COVID-19 test. She was not able to make the bread. My daughter's expectations and assumptions were shattered. Although we saw her really upset, we reminded her Nana was not feeling well. We had to hope she felt better soon and wouldn't have COVID-19. I told her that even I had to shift my expectations and now must create a new plan for breakfast. It certainly was stressful and not something I planned for.

Talking out loud, telling my daughter what was in my head at the time, and validating her feelings was an important part of this whole situation. I let her know I was upset too and asked her what she needed. Asking our kids what they need (not what they want) is a critical part in helping them self-regulate and advocate for emotional support. She said she needed to



be left alone for a bit. So even though it was a holiday morning that was supposed to be this fun, family time, I had to give her that time and space. Honoring that is a huge step in helping kids understand adults hear them and support them. It was hard to see my daughter and two other kids so upset. I had to remind myself that shifting is not a bad thing. It's a natural part of life, an essential executive function skill we all need to work on and will happen no matter how much we plan.

The holidays are a beautiful moment in time. We spend months getting ready for the big day, then it comes and goes within a blink of an eye. We have an opportunity to model for our clients, children, and students how to handle sudden changes best. Accepting that stress comes with the holidays is okay. Talk with your kids about why things are stressful. Inquire what parts of the holidays are stressful for them. Many will say, "I am stressed I won't get what I asked for or what I



want.” That’s a very real stress. Another stress may be, “Ugh! I hate having all those people in my house.” Once again, that is a real stress. Having people invade your space is never comfortable, even when they are family.

As parents, we want our kids to be excited to see family, or at the very least be kind and welcoming. So, talking with our kids about the proposed schedule for the day, the possible events happening, who will be coming, and when people may start to leave is all-important. Don’t assume your kids remember that most people start departing after dessert. Let them know that if there is a shift in the plan, they will be made aware of it.

Remember to breathe around these times. Taking time for you as a parent, educator, or clinician is so essential. Allow yourself to meet up with friends, get yourself that little something special, or watch a show only you want to watch. During these very stressful times of year, you need to make sure you are in a good place for those around you. So be ready to unwrap that stress and hit it head-on. Live out loud as you shift and breathe and make a new plan to overcome the barrier that may have fallen in front of you. Enjoy this moment in time and model for younger people how to enjoy the small parts of life and the amazing energy the holiday time brings to people and families.

***Happy Holidays from myself and everyone at the Social Learning Center!***



*Dr. Chris Abildgaard, EdD, NCSP, LPC, NCC, is the owner and director of the Social Learning Center, LLC, located in Cheshire, CT. He has been in private practice for over 13 years. Chris earned his Doctorate of Education in School Psychology from Loyola University Chicago. He is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist, a Board Certified*

*national Counselor and a Licensed Professional Counselor with a specialization in Autism Spectrum Disorders. Chris also holds a Graduate Certificate from the University of Massachusetts Lowell in Behavioral Interventions in Autism. Chris is an Adjunct Professor at the University of St. Joseph’s and the University of Hartford, both located in West Hartford, Connecticut.*

Website: <https://www.sociallearningcenter.org/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SocialLearningCenter>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SLC545>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/chrisabildgaardslc/>

**Karen Darby**  
Wealth Management Advisor  
Jacobi Capital Management

*Specialized planning  
for exceptional  
families*



Contact Karen for a  
complementary consultation  
Cell: 570.406.1406  
Office: 570.826.1801  
[kdarby@jacobicapital.com](mailto:kdarby@jacobicapital.com)

Investment Advisory Services and financial planning services are offered through Jacobi Capital Management, LLC, an SEC Registered Investment Adviser.

PLEASE  
JOIN  
US

Working together  
to promote  
awareness,  
acceptance,  
and inclusiveness  
for all people



[WWW.EXCEPTIONALNEEDSTODAY.COM](http://WWW.EXCEPTIONALNEEDSTODAY.COM)

