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Patient Alliance for Neuroendocrine/Immune Disorders
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Don't Let Chronic Pain Ruin Your Holiday Season

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Individual, Group, and Couples Therapy**

In the best of situations, even without pain, many people struggle with stress during the holidays, whether it be financial, emotional, dealing with family, and/or time constraints—not to mention finding the perfect gifts. Combine that stress with the difficulties that are caused by fibromyalgia, CFS-ME, and chronic pain disorders and the holiday season can be very challenging, and you need to use your energy wisely.

As a therapist for over 28 years and a fellow chronic pain sufferer (FMS and migraines), I've created a list of tools that can help you get through this busy time. Here are some specific **tools and tips** to make things easier during this season:

Challenge: The holiday dinner is at your house this year and you're feeling overwhelmed!

1. **Assess the Situation** – Determine specifically what part of this situation is overwhelming. Is it cleaning the house, preparing the meal, buying gifts, decorating your home, just getting out of bed, or all of above? Figure out exactly what element(s) are overwhelming you and then make a plan and take control. Remember, you cannot feel in control and overwhelmed at the same time.
2. **Expectations** – Do you need to grocery shop, set the table, clean the house, etc? Consider this process similar to eating a bunch of grapes. You would never just shove the entire bunch, stems included, into your mouth. You'd pull some off and eat them one at a time, which is an effective way to approach your planning for your dinner. If your party is on Saturday, then set the table on Monday, clean bathrooms on Tuesday, etc. If you're shopping, specifically plan a little break over a cup of coffee or tea while at the mall. When you have a plan, you feel more in control; and if you take baby steps and combine them with planning ahead, you can usually get a great deal accomplished.
3. **Plan** – Remember, we're not in a Norman Rockwell painting, so remove that image from your head. The beautifully wrapped gifts don't just magically appear and that perfect holiday turkey dinner doesn't happen without time and effort. Take a break and be realistic with yourself. Maybe purchase some of the holiday meal, it's OK. Buy some of your gifts online and avoid the crowds of the mall. Do what

you can in advance, a little at a time. Plan and pace yourself as much as possible. What's the worst that can happen? You put the dinner together, spend a bit of time with loved ones, and then go lie down for a bit. There's no shame in stepping out and having a little rest. The shame would be if you missed the fun with friends and family during the holidays.

4. **Communicate With Your Loved Ones** – Talk to your family! Tell them 'Because I have this disorder, I need your help.' Enjoy the time. It may even bring you closer together. Have them run by the grocery store, help clean the house, decorate, etc. My mother used to say that if it takes 20 minutes to clear the table, then if the 4 of us clear it'll take 5 minutes! Don't be afraid to ask for help from your loved ones. And by the way, if someone asks to bring a dish for dinner, thank them and take them up on it!
5. **Permission to Recharge** - When I'm tired, I must make the conscious decision to pace myself and take a rest when I need it. The biggest mistake we make when feeling well is going from 0 to 100, exhausting ourselves again and getting set back for days. Remember, *your inbox will never be empty*. There is never a day that goes by that there is not more to do! Realize when you've worked hard, and give yourself permission to stop, regroup, and recuperate.
6. **Create an Escape Route** - Even if you're feeling well, always give yourself permission to 'escape' or excuse yourself from an event, if necessary. If you know there will be lots of noise, stimulation, kids, and activities, map out a quiet room in advance to take a moment and do some breathing exercises. Anticipate these moments, map out an escape route, and don't be afraid to enjoy the celebrations of the season!

A parting tip: Some people face stress about being with their families over the holidays ... here's an idea: Sit back, breathe, and reframe. Think of it as a Seinfeld episode. See the humor in it, life can really be as enjoyable as a sitcom if you let it.

Want more Tools for Life? Karen is now accepting registration for the 6 week workshop entitled: How to Take Back Your Life in 2008. Controlling Your Pain So It Doesn't Control You! Karen D. Sacks, M.S., L.C.P.C., L.M.H.C, has been counseling individuals, couples, and groups for over 28 years and is one of the area specialists for coping with chronic pain. She is also one of our caring and dedicated board members and participates in our Public Policy Committee. For more information on her practice call 561.544.8889 or ksacks@cigcinfo.com.

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