



Tips for “Balancing” the Holidays when you have a Disability

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The holiday season isn't all jingle bells and sleigh rides when you have an invisible disability. As temps begin falling and your calendar starts filling, the stress and worry about how the hell you'll make it through it all begins to rear its Scrooge-like head.

Of course, this time of year can be stressful for everyone! There's a ton of pressure to look merry and create picture-perfect, Norman Rockwell-like moments, which are then of course, posted on Facebook. There are gifts to buy without going broke, relatives to please without creating drama, and parties to attend without gaining weight. Basically, there's a whole crapload of stuff to balance during the holidays, whether you have a disability or not.

But, add to this various physical and emotional stressors like chronic pain, foot drop, neuropathy, and extreme sensitivity to the cold, and the challenge of finding balance during the holidays becomes both a literal and a figurative one. Of course, you can stay home from now until after New Year's and avoid all uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situations. There would be no risk of slipping on a friend's driveway or spilling eggnog on the hostess if you RSVP “no” to everything! But, that would be really boring and depressing, don't ya think?

What follows are some common challenges among people with disabilities during the holiday season, along with tips for tackling these challenges and finding balance:

BALANCING EXPECTATIONS

You do not need to be a Pinterest queen to make the holidays special and memorable for your loved ones. There are no extra mom points for turning one's house into a winter wonderland or for spending hours creatively gift-wrapping. The truth is, while some people do appreciate the little details, most don't notice or care. It's really about you and deciding which parts of the holiday rigmarole bring you more joy than stress.

Let's use the whole real vs. artificial Christmas tree decision as an example. If you love having a real Christmas tree, then by all means, get a real tree. However, if picking up fallen needles and other aspects of having a live tree in your home take a toll on your body and stress level, then get an artificial tree and call it a day. If mobility issues make shopping in malls and stores difficult, then embrace the convenience of online shopping. Make reservations or have someone cater in if you don't enjoy cooking. Believe me, your loved ones would much rather have you at the holiday table, present and relaxed, than in the kitchen, all stressed out about an overcooked brisket. You have choices.

BALANCING YOUR CHECKBOOK

People with disabilities may overspend on their loved ones' gifts in an attempt to compensate for not being able to physically do everything for and with them during the year. Obviously, this is not good, especially for your bank account. Double check your purchases with your intentions to ensure you are not adding to your emotional stress.

BALANCING TO AND FRO

It is sooooo cold here in Michigan, and winter hasn't even officially started. If your winter weather is similar to mine, a good pair of warm, non-slip, waterproof boots is an essential! If you wear AFOS or orthotics, check out my website on

how to find fashionable wide-width boots to fit your orthotics or AFOS. If you already have boots but find them slippery, you can always add anti-slip pads or spray a non-skid coating to the bottoms.

It's smart to be proactive and to talk with the party host or the venue ahead of time about your disability and needs. Ask questions like:

- What is the parking situation?
- Are there stairs to get inside or to get to the bathroom?
- Will guests be expected to remove their shoes?

I know it isn't easy, but having a conversation beforehand will not only help to alleviate any pre-party angst, but it also helps others plan for the accommodations you may need ahead of time.

BALANCING AT PARTIES

The ability to navigate a party or event with an invisible disability (or multiple ones) is an art, not a science. I look forward to holiday parties even though I am a social butterfly trapped in the body of an unstable and uncoordinated caterpillar. Here are a few key tips for attending Holiday parties:

- Upon arrival, quickly scan the room or house and assess it for potential fall hazards such as slippery flooring, loose rugs, and extra-long tablecloths on the ground.
- Opt for a lightweight multi-way crossbody handbag to be hands-free and easily access your phone, lip gloss, and any essentials.
- Position yourself against a counter or wall, preferably near the drinks. Avoid planting yourself in a busy corner where people are constantly zipping by.
- Eat a bowl of cereal or something small and filling beforehand so that you're not starving and don't have to balance an appetizer plate along with a drink.

BALANCING CALORIES

I used to effortlessly shed a couple of pounds gained during the holidays by mid-January. Now, at age 53, it isn't so easy! A week of indulging in spinach dip and crackers can take months to rectify. For me, it's all about planning and balance. If I know I'll be going out at night, I'm careful about my food choices during the day.

Of course, I follow the basics like reducing carbs, staying hydrated, and exercising. I enjoy a drink or two (sometimes three) at parties, opting for low-calorie combinations like vodka and club soda. When I get the "Lainie, you've reached your limit" look from my hubby, I switch to the 'fake-tini' (club soda with lime) to feel festive without appearing more intoxicated than I am without even a sip of alcohol.

BALANCING SELF-CARE

Self-Care during the Holiday season isn't just about bubble baths and scented candles. For people with disabilities, self-care is about prioritizing yourself, paying attention to your body, and being able to communicate your needs with others. For both your physical and mental well-being and everyone else's enjoyment, it's important to hit pause when you need to.

Doing the holidays differently when you live with a disability is okay! Saying no is okay! Using dollar store gift bags instead of wrapping paper is ok! Not going to midnight mass when you're exhausted at 8 p.m. is perfectly okay! And, it's totally fine to say screw it and book a last-minute trip to Turks and Caicos 🇧🇸. When we remove all of the "shoulds" and put our needs first, the tightrope of the holiday season widens and becomes easier to balance and to ultimately cross.