



‘Tis the Season: Dealing with Holiday Stress and Anger, Part I

*“Victims of domestic violence are less likely to report incidents of violence throughout the holidays as they cling to the image of a perfect Christmas and strive to keep the family intact.”
-PsycPort News Story: Domestic Violence Peaks Around Holidays*

Physicians are like everyone else this time of year – they have more than their share of stress during the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day. This stress can make for a turbulent, even volatile holiday season for physicians and their families.

“Stress is exacerbated by the expectations associated with having the perfect holiday, having the perfect family time,” explained Michael Todd, Administrator of the Tennessee Medical Foundation (TMF), which serves troubled physicians through the Physicians Health Program (PHP). “As most of us have experienced, the *perfect* holiday rarely ever happens. If there is an added active addiction or untreated behavioral health problem, the quest for this elusive perfection is even greater.” Unfortunately, he added, these expectations are “rarely, if ever, met.”

Unfulfilled expectations lead to disappointment; disappointment can lead to depression; depression turned inward can lead to unhealthy anger. When active addiction is added to this scenario, “a volatile mix develops,” Todd said. This can lead to “acting out,” with disastrous consequences.

“Most people don’t know how to deal with this simmering pot and it finally boils over,” said Todd, adding that misdirected anger is a problem for many of the physician clients served by the PHP.

Anger is also the subject of many misconceptions, Todd offered. Anger myths include:

- **Anger is wrong** – “This is one of the biggest myths in our society,” Todd said, stating that this belief is the major underlying cause of unhealthy anger.
- **Anger is a waste of time and energy** – On the contrary, *believing* that anger is an emotion to avoid is unhealthy. “Anger is a natural reaction,” he said. “It’s how we deal with it that makes the difference.”
- **Anger will drive people away** – Not true, Todd said, but losing control in anger is inappropriate.

- **Anger is “not my fault”** – We are responsible for our own anger, no matter what the cause.
- **Anger is sinful** – “This myth is most common in the ‘Bible Belt’,” he added. Again, not true.

“Most people have one or more of these myths incorporated into their lives because anger is a feeling with which we are uncomfortable,” Todd said. “Add the stress of the holidays and anger sometimes comes out sideways – screaming matches, throwing things and even physical abuse.”

The PHP finds that dissipating these anger myths and working on a more healthy approach to anger and stress management can be a healing experience. Next month, we explore healthy responses to anger and stress in “Tis the Season: Dealing with Holiday Stress and Anger, Part II.” For information on the TMF and its PHP, log on to www.e-tmf.org or call 615-467-6411.