

Holiday stress

Holidays are supposed to offer relaxation and recuperation, but some people find them disappointingly stressful. One of the main reasons is the changing face of the Australian holiday. While many people used to take four weeks or more of leave from work, most people now take shorter breaks and choose destinations close to home. With less time to enjoy, many people compensate by organising jam-packed itineraries, which can lead to exhaustion and disillusionment.

The 'holiday of a lifetime' myth can create stress

Since Australians are taking shorter and fewer holidays, the pressure to have the 'perfect' holiday is higher than ever. Such expectation can lead to stress and disappointment. Suggestions include:

- Ease the pressure, if possible, by planning a few short breaks over the year. That way, the annual holiday won't take on so much importance that it fails your expectations.
- If possible, take longer holidays. You are more likely to feel relaxed after three weeks away rather than one.
- Action-packed itineraries can leave everyone exhausted and frazzled - the recuperative powers of 'doing nothing' while on holidays are underrated. Make sure you allow enough time for lazing on the beach, reading books and dawdling over good food.

Sidestep potential problems

Holidays can be marred by misfortune, but you can avoid many potential pitfalls with forethought and commonsense, including:

- Buy adequate travel insurance. Make sure it covers the needs of every family member.
- Be sun-smart and avoid sunburn by covering up and wearing sunscreen.
- Don't undertake risky adventure sports (such as parachuting) unless you are experienced.
- If you're keen on adventure sports, use the correct equipment and go with a trained professional.
- If travelling overseas, carry copies of important documents and items (such as passports, travellers cheques and credit cards) in case of theft.
- Take measures to avoid food poisoning - for example, don't eat at buffet restaurants.

Travelling with young children

Suggestions include:

- Involve older children in the planning for the holiday.
- Ask your travel agent for family-friendly suggestions. For example, you may like to consider two-bedroom accommodation, or a hotel with child-minding services.
- Balance everyone's needs. When visiting attractions with older children, try the 'trade off' method - activities for adults in the morning, balanced with activities for children in the afternoon.
- Keep it simple. Complicated trips involving lots of travelling, jam-packed itineraries or too many visits to adult-orientated attractions can be difficult on children and aggravating for parents.

Spending time together can be stressful

A family naturally expects to have a good time on holidays. However, it is worth remembering that most families only spend a few hours per day together because of work, school and recreational pursuits. Habits that are usually just annoying could become major sources of irritation when you spend every waking minute together on holidays. Suggestions include:

- Consider your accommodation options. It may be better to rent a two (or more) bedroom unit rather than a large bunkhouse, so that everyone can have some time to themselves when they want.
- Not every event has to be experienced as a family unit. Consider splitting the family into two 'teams' - for example, dad with one child and mum with the other - so you can explore attractions separately. Swap over the next day.
- Use negotiation to settle disputes. Trying to enforce calm by using the saying 'because I said so' will only make children grumpy and parents fed-up.

Step-families can experience holiday tension

Around four per cent of Australian families are step-families, while blended families (where partners each have children from prior relationships) account for about three per cent. In some cases, holidays for these families can be extremely difficult. Suggestions include:

- Appreciate that it may take five to eight years or so before everyone is comfortable enough with holidaying together to really enjoy it.
- Together, acknowledge that this is a new family that needs 'new' traditions, including where and how you go on holiday. Work as a group to come up with ideas that suit everyone (expect to compromise).
- Anticipate and allow each person to miss and grieve the holiday traditions of their original family. Where possible, accommodate wishes.
- Keep the communication lines open. Talk to each other about feelings, wants and disappointments.
- Don't brush over conflicts while on holiday. Use this time to help work out the dynamics of your new family.
- Set limits. The stability of your marriage must take precedence, since your new family is at risk without your commitment to each other as partners.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Travel agent
- Family counsellors.

Things to remember

- Rather than spend four weeks or so on holiday, Australians are increasingly taking shorter breaks and choosing destinations close to home.
- With less time to enjoy, many people compensate by organising jam-packed itineraries, which can lead to exhaustion and disillusionment.
- Take the needs of each family member into account when planning a holiday.
- Keep expectations realistic - a few weekends away during the year will reduce the pressure on the annual holiday to be 'perfect'.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

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