

It's time for a

It was three weeks before Christmas. Laurie Raphael's grandmother was dying. A friend—recently diagnosed with cancer—asked if Laurie would mind watching her children for a few days while she underwent surgery. With all this on her plate, you'd think Laurie would let some of her holiday duties slide. Not a chance. Three a.m. found her in the dining room, spray-painting walnuts for her holiday centerpieces. "I knew it was crazy. But deep down, I didn't believe the holidays would be as wonderful if I didn't serve the perfect meal on the perfect dishes, with the perfect decorations," recalls this Danbury, CT-based interior designer and mom.

Not surprisingly, the stress in her life, along with that caused by her self-imposed holiday jobs, soon set in, and Laurie found herself walking around with a tight chest, an anxious feeling in her stomach, and the inability to get anything—even the most menial tasks—completed.

"For many people, the holiday season and extra family time stir up a hornet's nest of emotions," says Dr. Phil. Couple these intensely charged get-togethers with the added weight of unhealthy beliefs or behaviors like Laurie's perfectionism, and you'll find yourself carrying more than just gifts into the holiday season. Here, the toxins that mess with your mind most...and some no-fuss strategies for clearing them away.

Mental Toxin #1: HOW THE GRUDGE STOLE CHRISTMAS

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT: Holding on to resentment or anger like a pit bull on the ankle?

You've chosen to carry the toxic burden of a grudge. For Rosanne Herrera of Newark, CA, turkey wasn't the only thing on her plate as she and her 6-year-old daughter celebrated their first Thanksgiving after her divorce. "I had so much resentment toward my ex for ruining my white-picket-fence image of marriage," she recalls.

WHY IT BRINGS YOU DOWN: Carrying around such hostility can actually contaminate every aspect of your life because it alters your perception of reality. When you view life through this poisoned filter, you bring your pain into everything you do. Grudge-holding can also manifest itself physically: Rosanne turned to food for comfort, developed severe neck problems, and found herself taking her anger out on her daughter. "I was often short with her, and was constantly apologizing and saying, 'Mommy was just frustrated today,'" she recalls. "I think that's how my daughter actually learned the word *frustrated*!"

HOW TO LET IT GO: Remember Life Law #9: There is power in forgiveness. Forgiving someone doesn't mean that what happened

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to you is okay, or that you're a pushover—on the contrary, it is a powerful act that frees you from the prison of your anger. Forgiving doesn't even have to be a spoken gesture; it can simply be something you do internally to seek peace. In Rosanne's case, hosting her own holiday celebration was the answer: "It empowered me, because I realized I had the ability to invite all my extended family and make this house with two people a home."

Mental Toxin #2: IMPURE PERFECTION

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT: In a nutshell (or in Laurie's case, a gold-painted walnut shell), perfectionism means you are constantly trying to achieve a self-induced standard that you haven't a shot in hell of reaching. Often, perfectionist children are the products of perfectionist parents—the kind who want to know why the A on the report card isn't an A+.

WHY IT BRINGS YOU DOWN: Not unlike having sex without ever having a climax, perfectionism leaves you perpetually

ILLUSTRATION: CATHY GENDRON

HEALTH DETOX

THE TOP 4 TOXINS THAT DESTROY YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH—AND HOW TO SWEEP 'EM AWAY BEFORE THE HOLIDAYS **By Hillary Quinn**

unfulfilled. “Constantly feeling like a failure means that you can’t ever enjoy the good in life right now,” says Dr. Foojan Zeine, a Tarzana, CA-based therapist who has studied Dr. Phil’s methods.

HOW TO LET IT GO: Test your internal responses for accuracy. For example, if keeping the house meticulously clean has become your obsession, start by asking yourself if the house is truly dirty. Next, ponder whether the endless cleaning is really in your best interest (perhaps you’re doing it to impress others who don’t even care). And last, think hard about whether the obsession gets you more of what you want, need, and deserve in life. Running through this mantra every time will allow reality to surface, resulting in a shift toward healthier behavior. Laurie’s defining moment came when she realized she didn’t have the energy left to pull off a grand-slam holiday celebration.

“Because I’d had meaningful time with my grandmother and felt good about watching my friend’s kids, a sense of peace set in and I was oddly okay with doing only half of what I’d planned,” she says.

Mental Toxin #3: FOR SHAME

WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT: Though it’s easy to throw the blame on others, no one can make you feel guilty. “Shame and guilt stem from internal labels we put on ourselves—and we’re the only ones who can take them away,” says Dr. Phil. Often, these emotions are rooted in difficult family relationships, which is why the holiday season puts the issue front and center.

WHY IT BRINGS YOU DOWN: Walking around feeling ashamed of every rough edge in your life slowly chips away at your authentic

self, diminishes your worth, and makes you a less effective person in love and in life. Case in point: Ten years ago, Julia Havey of St. Louis was in a disintegrating marriage. To fill the void, food became her substitute partner, and size 26 clothes the result. Blaming the end of her marriage on the weight gain, Havey felt ashamed of her body and guilty over wasting her life.

HOW TO LET IT GO: “Start by forgiving yourself,” advises Zeine. “How would you judge somebody else in the same position?” This kind of self-audit puts your guilt or shame in perspective. Julia’s defining moment came one evening when a homeless man heckled her for being overweight, saying, “Girl, you got too much food in you!” “Up until that moment, I had let my fat become a personality trait,” recalls Julia. “But then I realized he wasn’t saying I was a bad wife or mother; he was telling me my body was fat.” Today, Julia is 130 pounds lighter and happily remarried.

If the guilt-shame cycle always comes in response to certain people or situations—say, every time you see your parents they comment on your weight or how you are raising your children—enlist a friend or spouse to role-play and work out some defusing language. Example: “Mom, I know you have my best interests at heart, but I’m just not comfortable letting Susie cry it out; my technique seems to work better for us.”

Mental Toxin #4: HIGH ANXIETY

WHAT IT’S ALL ABOUT: If you spend excessive energy worrying about everything from finances to your health to your relationships, it’s inevitable that the holidays will only build on that agitation. Add hopes for tender family moments, ambitious decorations, and rekindled faith, and you’re heading for a crash and burn.

WHY IT BRINGS YOU DOWN: “Anxiety is almost always expressed in a physical way,” explains Zeine, who says the resulting heart palpitations, edginess, and lack of concentration may leave you dysfunctional and unable to take positive action. When Bob Jennings of Everett, WA, was contemplating ending his marriage of 20 years, stress hit hard. “I was so unhappy, but I

was afraid to make a change because I was fearful of what it would do to my boys, whether I could make a new life for myself,” he explains. Not surprisingly, the months of worrying caused sleepless nights and made him irritable and depressed.

HOW TO LET IT GO: Just as with a phobia, fear and anxiety aren’t always based in reality. Your job is to replace that irrational internal dialogue with a more authentic vision. As Dr. Phil points out, if you’re going to worry yourself with all the why, how, and what-if questions in life, it’s critical to

give yourself realistic answers. For Bob, the end of his marriage, while heartbreaking, was actually an emotional relief. “As painful as it was, it was worse in my mind,” he says. For Laurie, imagining the worst-case scenario (a Christmas without all the bells and whistles) turned out to be her salvation: “When I realized we could have a season of family togetherness that had nothing to do with dishes or decorations, I truly felt released from my anxiety.” ■

**“You don’t have to
relive the same old
toxic scripts every
holiday season.”**

—Dr. Phil