

Reflect

Re-think

Redesign

Revisit

Restore



The 5 **Rs** for Promoting Health During the Holidays

An Interview with Occupational Therapist Regina Campbell

Melissa Velez Coelho: We know that for many the holiday season can be perceived as more stressful than joyful. What strategies would you recommend for those affected by spondylitis to make the most of this holiday season?

Regina Campbell: It's ironic that we even use the word "holiday" for the season because holiday is defined as a day of rest from regularly scheduled activities and a time away from our work and duties. Yet we know for many the holiday season has been reported to be one of the most stressful and, unfortunately, unhealthy times of the year. People are often doing too much during the holiday season for others and not enough for themselves. That is where the focus starts and one of the first strategies is to gift yourself first. To achieve this, I suggest 5 Rs to keep in mind during the holiday season.

First, reflect on the holiday habits, routines, roles and rituals that give meaning to your season. This is another way of saying "look at your priorities".

The second R is re-think what the holiday really means to you and those you love. I think we can get distracted by the media and advertising and what it should mean, but we need to really reflect back on what it means to us and our significant others.

As we reflect and re-think, then it's time to redesign. In redesigning your holiday performance patterns you want to look at what you love to do. When do you love to do it? With whom do you love to do it? Think about the person, the activity and the context and fit that into what your current capacities are. You cannot deny your symptoms but you can look at them differently. This helps you to create a lifestyle plan that will help you to think about each day. You have to look at this as a daily plan. "What can I do in terms of redesigning how I'm managing my holiday season this year so that I can move more towards health and the happiness that I'm looking for?"

The fourth R is revisiting and revising this daily. With chronic conditions such



as spondylitis there are good days, there are better days and there are not so good days. Each day requires one to look at how they're going to manage that day not only to accomplish everything that they want, but also to put health first.

The last R would be to restore your spirit for the holiday. You really want to be looking for the "dos" that you can do. To restore that spirit you really need to realign your expectations of yourself and others and then that helps you to work towards finding the right balance between doing and not overdoing.

MVC: What can those affected by spondylitis do to manage stress during the holidays?

Regina Campbell: There is probably not a person in the United States today that is not stressed to some degree about our economy. It is a stressful time and it is a time for us to really go back to those five Rs in terms of trying to realign. The old saying “don’t spend more than you have” is just as relevant to the state of our economy today as it is to the state of improving our health. Think about your health as a resource and how much capacity you have physically and emotionally as well as financially.

Learning to say no is difficult for a lot of people and this in itself can cause stress during the holiday season. If saying no is difficult you can say “I need to think about it” so that you don’t add the stress of not being able to do something that might be meaningful. Think about how you might be able to redesign a new way to do it, or do it at a different time, so you can work toward reducing that stress. We need to accept that stress is a mind-body experience and realize that we can’t really address one without addressing the other. Stress -- physical stress and emotional stress like pain and fatigue that accompany spondylitis -- are bi-directional. One influences the other and so we really need to treat them and think about them as a unit.

Examining our performance patterns during the holiday season to identify which ones we believe support our health and those that we believe might hinder our health is really a start for managing that stress. It gives you the control back to look at what you might be able to do differently. We need to be more mindful, to be more intentional about how we examine our habits, our holiday routines, our roles and our rituals.

MVC: Do you have any suggestions for holiday gifts that would help our members to sustain health for years to come?

Regina Campbell: I think the first thing I would recommend is to give to yourself first. The best gift that you could give yourself and others is the gift of health. Re-think how you can reduce any risk that might potentially impact your health and well-being and your ability to enjoy the season.

Individuals with spondylitis have increased risks beyond the active disease process. We know that because of the disease process they’re at greater risk for secondary conditions such as osteoporosis, so look at the risk of falling during the holiday season and what you can do to reduce that risk. It does go back to changing your habits and your routines.

*“Think about your health
as a resource...”*

Think about stopping short of the point of fatigue. When we’re tired we’re more at risk for injury and we’re more at risk for falling. Re-evaluate where you store items, especially those seasonal items that are often put on top shelves and require a ladder. Climbing a ladder when you’re tired can increase the risk.

Re-evaluate your capacity for lifting heavy items -- from the groceries that we tend to buy more of during the holidays, to the shopping that we might do at the mall, to the decorating that we might do around the house or outside. There’s obviously a greater risk in terms of heavier items that we’re carrying this time of year. Put things in smaller loads. It’s been noted also that many back injuries, particularly in the work place (it would also be true at home) occur at the end of the day when people are physically and mentally fatigued. Look at the time of day that you might be doing some of your heavier work and make sure that you don’t already feel fatigued and at that point stop before you are fatigued.

When resting, physically do nothing. Sit down and take your mind to a point where it is restful. There’s a strategy called guided imagery that’s inexpensive and an effective way of managing stress. Research has found that guided imagery is an effective strategy in directing our mind and restoring our spirit. Use guided imagery when you’re in stressful situations, for example while waiting in a line, and you may want to use some of the symbols of the season to help you relax -- a lit candle sitting by the fireplace, watching the Christmas tree, looking out the window or watching children play in the snow. The use of music can also help you to relax and reminisce about those pleasant and playful times. A gift of aromatherapy, burning a candle with the scent of the season, cinnamon or any other aromas may help you relax.

Lastly, give yourself the gift of sleep which is often depleted during the holiday season when we’re trying to do too much. Remember how important sleep is to restoring your spirit and that mind and body balance. Physiologically our bodies cannot function without adequate amounts of sleep and when they’re stressed further by chronic disease processes we have to take extra care to make sure that we find ways to get restored of sleep, to restore our spirit. Just as we think about the environment to reduce risk we need to think about what we have in our environment that helps us to prepare for sleep. Think about those things that give you the most joy at the end of the day rather than all the things you didn’t accomplish. Start the day with a positive attitude and end the day with a positive attitude. Think about those things that give you the most joy and fuel your faith.

If you give one gift to yourself this season I suggest you also give the gift of hope. Thomas Carl said, “He who has health has hope and he who has hope has everything.”

This interview is part of one of our audio interviews with experts. Visit us at: www.spondylitis.org/podcast for more.