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MANAGING HOLIDAY SEASON STRESS

GREENSBURG, PA, December 12, 2011 ...The holiday season is often a time of joy, a time of sharing gifts and reconnecting with family and friends. However, for many of us, the holidays can also be a time of increased anxiety. Psychiatrist David Rosenthal, MD, MHA, medical director of Behavioral Health Services at Excela Health, has identified these key sources of increased stress:

1. Activity Overload

It's very easy to give in to pressure to maintain holiday season traditions or try to to make each year even more "special" than the last. "The signs of activity overload are pretty straightforward," says Dr. Rosenthal. "If preparing for the holidays feels like a series of chores and/or fills you with dread, you're doing too much." The solution to this problem seems simple - cut back and don't do so much. A problem with this is that holiday activities are seen as obligations, things we ought to do. "Giving yourself permission to do less is the key to reducing the stress of activity overload. You are actually the one who is creating all the expectations. Give yourself a break."

2. Financial Worries

"Despite the serious consequences of spending money one can't afford, most of us will do so during the holidays, even those who are unemployed or in real danger of losing their jobs," notes Dr. Rosenthal. The reason for this is, again, the expectations that we place on ourselves and the associated guilt we feel if they are not met. "Changing our expectations is key to reducing the financial stress associated with holidays. Discuss with your family a holiday gift budget and then stick to it. An honest talk about the amount of money the family can afford to spend will not be as painful as you expect. It should make everyone

value the gifts they receive much more than they would have before. And by setting financial limits now, you can reduce one of the most destructive forms of chronic stress, the stress of debt.”

3. Loss/Loneliness

A major holiday ideal consists of being surrounded by family and friends. For many of us, because of bereavement, separation/divorce or personal isolation, the reality is much different. “The disconnect between idealized expectations you create and your true personal circumstances can be very stressful,” says Dr. Rosenthal. “If you don’t feel like being around people, give yourself permission to have a peaceful, quiet day. If the thought of being by yourself is too upsetting, think of volunteering or working a shift during the holidays. This will provide both company and the satisfaction of helping others enjoy their holiday.”

4. Interpersonal/Family Conflict

Most of the time, exposure to family dysfunction and interpersonal conflicts is something we can endure for the sake of the holidays. In fact, we see it as our obligation to do so. There are, however, certain situations that are extremely unhealthy and potentially dangerous (such as triggers for substance use or exposure to perpetrators of past abuse.) “Unless you already have a very solid support system in place, you need to challenge the expectations that we place on ourselves and give yourself permission to avoid such situations,” says Dr. Rosenthal.

Excelsa Health offers help to those struggling to cope. To learn more, contact the Excelsa Health Call Center, toll-free, 1-877-771-1234.