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## **Festive fever**

### **For working women with families, donning Santa's hat overloads their plate**

**By JOANNE RICHARD  
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'Tis the season for giving and giving and giving some more. The festive season leaves no time to be jolly for many women who are already wearing too many hats and have to don one more -- Santa's.

Incessant holiday demands leave many women feeling ho-ho-hopeless as to-do lists rival Christmas wish lists and women whose plates are already overloaded year round, end up in perpetual overdrive.

The "over-givers" trend is alive and not well, says Heidi Cowie, a Hamilton counsellor. The pressures are overwhelming: Forty-five percent of Canadian women frequently feel stressed by work, family responsibilities and/or family finances and 52% feel they don't have enough time for family, friends or partners, and/or things they would like to do, reveals a Heart and Stroke Foundation study.

These are the statistics of a new generation of increasing expectations and multiple roles -- which multiply at Christmas. "Over-givers are mostly women trying to please their children, their spouse, their bosses, and maybe even their aging parents." says Cowie.

Nellie Noack knows: She is the classic over-giver -- or was. Noack, 39, just went back to work after a four-month stress leave from her job as sales manager for Avon. She not only manages 380 reps, but mothers three teens, ages 16, 15 and 13. This year, "I just bottomed out," says Noack. Despair and disillusionment set in and "I stopped caring about everything." She spent the first six weeks in bed, sleeping and reading; "I never left the house." Eventually, through counselling, she acquired skills to do less and not feel guilty about it.

Noack has revamped the holiday season too: "We're either going on a holiday or we're totally low-keying Christmas and keeping it simple."

#### **'Second or third job'**

According to Marilyn Barnicke Belleghem, "Many women take on too much responsibility for making the holiday celebrations perfect. They do this on top of their other responsibilities so holiday preparation can become a second or even a third job.

"The media portrays festivities with elaborate cooking, decorating and socializing and it all looks like so much elegance and fun that many women feel pressured to create something special,"

adds the registered marriage and family therapist and author of *Questing Marilyn: In Search of My Holy Grail, Personal Growth Through Travel*.

According to Cowie, the increased demands and expectations of the holiday season demand higher stamina and energy. "We may feel forced to function at a higher level, which snowballs into higher self-imposed expectations.

"I like to draw the analogy of a layer cake -- you can add only so many layers before the cake topples over. So we have more people going into depression, substance dependencies and marital breakdowns. When we have reached our limit on all levels, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and physically, there is no more room for holiday pressures. We basically just get through the season in combat mode and the fallout occurs when it's all over."

According to Belleghem, exhaustion and inability to enjoy the holidays abound. "They often get sick and lose their enjoyment of the seasonal fun. Many people get fearful that their gift, food, clothing, hair, etc., is not good enough. This causes anxiety.

Cowie says women need to be realistic and stop thinking they can be all things to all people. Realistically evaluate the roles you have and start choosing the roles you want to have.

"Understand that anger and resentments are common feelings and reactions to overgiving, and stop feeling guilty. Anyone can be angry but it needs to be at the right person, to the right degree, at the right time and in the right way."

Now Noack has got it right: She's learned to delegate more chores. "Two chores a day per kid. And if chores and homework don't get done, then there's no computer time." Many extracurricular activities have been reduced, including hockey. "I made at least five to six trips a week to the arena."

Adds Heather McKechnie, women are still expected to do it all. "The reward for being a giver is far greater than the reward for being a delegator. Women are more inclined to live the Golden Rule -- Do Unto Others -- and believe it to be a true measure of their personal worth," says the registered marriage and family therapist.

### **delegate, delegate**

Saying "no" is a good thing, says counsellor Heidi Cowie. "Practice it loudly, often and without guilt."

In order to get through the season, therapist Marilyn Barnicke Belleghem advises:

- Share baking in a group get together so each person has a selection and the baking day is fun.
- Spread the gatherings over a longer period. Have a leftover party in early January.
- Take turns being the hostess from year to year with friends and family.
- Make charitable donations rather than buying and wrapping gifts.
- Limit the number and cost of gifts.
- Ask guests to help.
- Have a sunshine Christmas somewhere warm.
- Share the self, not stuff.
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Therapist Heather McKechnie says to "delegate, delegate, delegate! Many husbands would do more if they knew what to do. Make a list and send him off. Women tend to assume that their

partners know what work needs to be done when, in fact, many men don't really have much of a clue because someone has always done this for them."

### **emotional overdrive**

Anxiety is the new glass ceiling.

According to a new Leger survey, one in five working women in Canada report experiencing depression and anxiety, and it's affecting their day-to-day work lives.

Of those, about seven out of 10 felt that their depression and anxiety limited them at work. Leger reports 23% of the women surveyed with depression or anxiety quit their jobs, and 21% took disability leave at one point in their careers as a result of their conditions. Of those who continued to work, almost three quarters say these conditions left them feeling overwhelmed at work and 58% say these conditions left them unmotivated to get things done.

In addition, nearly half avoided contact with co-workers or stayed home from work, and 27% did not seek promotions due to their depression or anxiety.

The study, funded by Wyeth Pharmaceuticals, reveals that 71% of respondents with depression and anxiety had children, yet surprisingly they rated their mood-related symptoms as greater barriers to workplace success than either pregnancy or child rearing.

### **Stress, depression**

Experts agree that stress contributes to depression and anxiety: "When people feel they have given and given and it is never enough, they start to withdraw and stop caring about themselves and others. This often leads to depression," says therapist Marilyn Belleghem.

According to counsellor Heidi Cowie, "the study fails to mention that depression and anxiety weave their way into a woman's personal relationships."

The entire family structure and harmony can come tumbling down causing more depression and anxiety, she adds. "Families bear the brunt of our emotional turmoil. We are more apt to control our emotions at work but when we are home, we let them rip."

She says "statistical information can be manipulated in many ways to show the need for yet another medication to solve our woes. Drugs are not the only source of treatment." Cowie says people need to be given skills and strategic tools to eliminate roadblocks that prevent them from leading the lives they want.