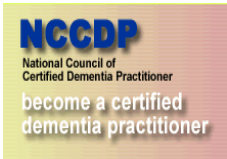


**SANDRA STIMSON**  
 Executive Director  
[Alternative Solutions in LTC](#)  
 and  
 National Council of Certified  
 Dementia Practitioners  
<http://www.nccdp.org>

**ABOUT SANDRA**

Sandra Stimson has experience as a corporate consultant, Corporate Trainer and National Speaker. Her experience is in long term care, as Activity Director, Director of Alzheimer's Units and Assistant Administrator of a 550 bed long term care county home. She is Co-founder of Pet Express Pet Therapy Club, is a Life Replay Specialist. Sandra implements dementia units nationwide. Sandra has written several books, Volunteer Management Essentials for Long Term Care and Pet Express Pet Therapy Program. Sandra has been a facilitator for Alzheimer's support groups and is the Awards Chair for the NJ Association of Activity Professionals. Sandra is the Executive Director of **National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners** <http://www.nccdp.org>.

[Alternative Solutions in Long Term Care](#) offers resources for health care professionals in many areas of dementia care, care plans, Snoezelen products, dementia activity calendars, adult day care calendars, sensory calendars, reminisce videos for dementia, activity books, and dates to remember, party supplies, resources and links.



Each Norman Rockwell print is paired with a national standards of Resident Rights and is illustrated by a picture depicting the "Resident Right."

# Pathways to the Past

by Sandra Stimson ADC, CALA, CDP  
Executive Director, [Alternative Solutions in Long Term Care](#)



## Activity Directors Guidelines to Surviving the Holidays



Starting from November to January 1st, marks the busiest time of the year for the Activity Departments in Long Term Care. The list of things to get done seem to keep getting longer. Why in the most joyous time of the year is it the most stressful for activity directors?

Activity Directors are pulled in many directions during the holidays, from greeting drop in groups and individuals making donations, to arranging for events, office duties, running programs, staff call outs due to illness, etc. It is a crazy time of year. Expectations are high and time demands increased. All add to stress. Stress can cause depression, low productivity, illness, disease, apathy and forgetfulness. There is good stress and bad stress yet, all if it is still stress. The most common stressors during the holidays are finances, relationships, military commitments, health problems and physical demands (at work and home). Add in to the mix unrealistic expectations either professionally for the holidays or personally. Sometimes the director wears many hats, mother, wife, Girl Scout leader, church volunteer, meals on wheels volunteer, etc. At work, you may be in charge of other departments, from the dementia unit to committees. This can add to your stress.

Often times, the directors are depleted emotionally and unable to enjoy holidays with their families. We know the stress is coming. Why not plan and anticipate it. Don't allow stress to overwhelm you or sneak up on you. Make a list now of things that will stress you, money, responsibilities, management duties, survey during the holidays, etc.

There are those who seem to handle stress very well. This type of individual has the following traits;

- They see life as a challenge, not as a threat or an unending series of hassles. Remember, every problem is an opportunity in disguise
- They are committed to what they are doing. Having a mission or purpose in life - an overriding belief that what you are doing is right and meaningful - gives you tremendous staying power.
- They have a sense of being in control of their life. Feeling in control, capable of handling whatever problems arise, frees a person from the distractions and depletion of energy experienced by someone who feels like a "victim." Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching

### Here are some strategies to ensure you enjoy the holidays and get past the stress.

- You're the manager. Do not show anyone that you are frazzled. Otherwise you might convey you are not an effective manager.
- Take care of yourself first. Just like the announcement on planes, put the oxygen mask on your face first! If you are not handling the daily demands and are not learning new strategies to cope, you are not doing anyone especially yourself any good. At the end of the day, you are left feeling depleted and discouraged. We can change that around, by making small changes and modifying our approach to all the tasks that have to be completed. BREATHE!
- Don't skip lunch or breaks. You need time to relax and regroup.
- Keep a "to-do" list and each day make a list of everything that has to be done. Check off what has been completed.
- Prioritize your list. Anything that is not extremely urgent and important can wait till after the holidays.
- Use a message pad to write down messages. That way you are not looking for a phone number on small pieces of paper.
- Keep your desks clear and neat. Get a box and put all those catalogues and magazines in the box and deal with it after the holidays. Figure out why you have piles, but for now put it out of sight.
- Stay very organized. Begin a Red folder for December and Orange for November and place everything in that folder related to the events planned.
- Keep an envelope in your purse / wallet to hold receipts.
- Plan your November and December calendars as early as possible. Shoot for the 20th of each month. Don't wait till the end of the month to complete the calendars.
- Stay focused on what has to get accomplished each day. Try to complete one task before going on to another.
- Return calls at a specific time. Usually late in the day is better. Have the receptionist hold your calls and take messages or send to your voice mail.
- Don't take on more than you can handle, learn to say no.
- Expect to fall short of perfect.
- Book holiday entertainment as early as you can.

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- Take the time to meet with your staff on a daily basis and keep them in the loop on holiday preparations. See what duties your staff can take care of. Involve your staff in the holiday planning.
- Try not to eat the holiday cookies and cakes. Eat healthy during the next two months.
- Take time to go on an outside walk, even if only for 5 minutes. You will come back refreshed and energized.
- Go to the local activity meetings in your area. Hearing that others are overwhelmed can help.
- Make it known you need help. If you are a perfectionist maybe you have given the impression in the past that you can do everything? But at what costs? Let staff and department heads know when you need help. But give everyone sufficient notice. Start by discussing now what you will need help with. Keep your administrator informed and that you need his / her support. You might be planning a huge elegant dining holiday dinner which will need all the departments' involvement. Put everything in writing and keep meeting about it and discussing and reminding.
- Send thank you notes to everyone who helped you during the holidays.
- See if your staff would like to participate in a gift exchange with a 10.00 limit. Not everyone in your department can afford to participate. Keep the gifts simple from you, such as gift certificates for coffee, donuts, movies, candle, etc. Or have a holiday baked item exchange which is very economical. Everyone can bring in a dozen baked items. You can purchase tins at the dollar store. Everyone in your department can sample all the baked goods.



## Volunteers

- Look at large corporations who have employee volunteer programs who can assist with decorations and setting up and taking down the holiday trees.
- Place volunteer forms with the receptionist that will capture the name of organizations and individuals who drop off donations and provide holiday entertainment. The forms should capture the company name, contact person, phone number, address, email address and what service or donation was provided. In January send a Thank you note. You might be surprised at the number of individuals or companies who might come back to volunteer on a regular basis. Use prepared Thank You Cards so the only thing required is to enter the address on the envelope.
- Utilize volunteers for as many tasks as you can. Advertise now that you need volunteers to assist with the holiday preparations. Think of all the tasks you need to accomplish from invitations, wrapping gifts, shopping, visiting residents, etc. Often times, if a perspective volunteer sees a specific task they can do, they will call you.
- For some residents, the holidays are the saddest time of year. They are missing loved ones, their home and past life. Volunteers can spend time with these residents and add to the quality of their life. Have a prepared list of residents to visit and have them document their visits on a form you have created.

## Staff: How can you decrease the stress for your staff?

- Put up the staff schedule two months in advance. Have the staff review and initial.
- Be aware of staff burn out. They may be having the same stress you are feeling and emotions due to relationships, finances and work / home responsibilities. As their supervisor it is your responsibility to address that and if necessary get your HR department involved. Sometimes, just giving them time to vent, will help in the situation. Encourage your staff to take their breaks and include short walks during their breaks as a stress reliever. Be aware of signs of burnout. Involve your HR department if you are aware of burnout.
- Be sure to have the supplies they need and in working order.
- Keep them aware of all issues that they are involved in on a daily basis and you will have an informed staff.
- Don't add to the stress. Do they need to know everything that is going on in the facility?
- Print out articles on stress and share the strategies with your staff.
- Keep the office neat and organized so that the office is a place to relax, regroup and calm down. If it is a shared office space, make it mandatory that desks are neat and supplies are put away daily by the staff.
- There is always that one person in your department you can count on, don't keep overloading that person. Learn to delegate to others, encourage them to rise to the occasion, expect more from the other members of your team.
- Play soft music.
- Offer refreshments in the office, such as juice and coffee.
- Compliment them often, acknowledge personal accomplishments and say Thank you frequently.
- Don't lose sight of why you took this job and the gratification you receive. You took this position for many reasons, career advancement, financial gains, a calling, emotional fulfillment or maybe all of the above.
- You are doing this job for the residents and they appreciate all that you do and see how hard you and your staff work.
- Home strategies to survive the holidays. Holidays are important to your family and they don't really understand that you put up 14 trees and now you have to put up your own family tree. Look at what you have planned for at home.
- What are your expectations for the holidays? Do you really need a 10 course holiday dinner? Can some of your guests make a dish? Can some of your guests arrive early and help with the setting of the table? Do you have to foot the bill for the entire holiday dinner? Can you cook ahead and freeze part of it?

- Limit the alcohol you provide to your guests or don't have any at all if this has contributed to yet another disastrous holiday meal.
- Don't get sucked into a guilt trip. If the holiday dinner is just too much stress, suggest meeting at a restaurant. If you prefer to stay in your own home for Christmas, suggest getting together Christmas Eve. You have your own family now and if driving to the in-laws is just too stressful, suggest another day. Begin new traditions.
- Give all family something to do, they want to feel useful. Don't do it all yourself. When they offer to help, say "Yes."
- Have a backup plan. Have games and videos that your group may enjoy.
- This year's disaster may be next year's funny story. Like using salt instead of sugar! It happens. Or you might have forgotten to turn the oven on for that huge turkey that needs 6 hours and oh yeah, you forgot to defrost it. .
- In your home, put your decorations up for the holidays in advance. Otherwise, you may be too tired or emotionally disconnected to enjoy what you and your family love.
- Can gifts be eliminated all together and just have a holiday dinner? Or can you set a limit such as 15 dollars per person and do a gift exchange and everyone pull one name instead of buying for 50 family members. Times are tough right now with the economy and job security out the window and our loved ones serving in the military.
- Does every package need to be gift wrapped? If yes, than let the stores who offer the service wrap your presents. Try using holiday gift bags? Does everything have to be perfect?
- Can you use online services to order gifts from and gift cards make great gifts especially for teen agers.
- Anticipate strategies now to deal with difficult family members. Decide now that you will not get sucked into yet another family argument. Try to change the topic if politics come up. This can only lead to disaster.
- Decide to not answer a rude comment with one of your own. Some people, that's all they know is how to insult and hurt others. You don't have to be like that! Don't get sucked in.
- Say you're sorry and mean it. The stress of hanging on to guilt, is well, stressful and in the end, only hurts you. You may not control someone else's comments but you can control your reaction.
- Try not to worry about things out of your control. Only deal with the task at hand.
- Stay positive. If you feel yourself becoming negative, focus on the positive.
- Adjust your attitude. You decide if you want to get upset, how upset and how long you will hang on to it. It's not about conflict and strife but about togetherness, love and peace.
- Be kind to others. If you say something nice first, perhaps that will follow with a nice come back or comment as well.
- Try to stick to your routines and keep the holidays in perspective.
- Have an honest talk with your children about what you can afford. Ask them each for one thing they want, not a list. Keep lines of communication open. They feel stress to.
- Plan your budget for the holidays and stick with it. Shop at discount stores and look for bargains. Shop in the very early morning, less people and the parking is available.
- Be aware of your behavior and your body. These are signs of stress, stomach aches, tired or sluggish, headaches, irritable, mean, grumpy, and short tempered. Might mean you are over stressed. Generally symptoms of not getting enough restful sleep and can cause you to have difficulty concentrating. Rest as often as you can.
- Laugh often. If things have gotten way to stressful and serious, look for humor outlets. YouTube has fantastic opportunities to laugh. Watch the videos on Children laughing or dancing. Put into the search engines, funny Santa's and see all the great pictures and comics.
- Learn deep breathing and relaxation techniques. Purchase a mediation tape.
- Massages are great as well as manicures and pedicures. All are very soothing and relaxing. Treat yourself. Don't you deserve it?
- In the car, don't play the news. Put on relaxing music.
- Get fresh air. Practice Yoga and deep breathing
- Cut back on caffeine. Replace with water. Stay hydrated.
- Get 8 hours of sleep. Turn off the TV and read a book in bed.
- Take vitamins.
- Play uplifting music that makes you feel good. And in the car crank it up, if this helps.
- Eat nutritionally during the holidays. Resist temptation for all the deserts. Think about how you feel after the holidays. You don't have to partake and eat everything that is offered. Stick to your diet. It's ok to have a small portion but do you need second? Fats and sweets actually make you feel tired.
- Take time for reflection. Slow down or you will miss the moments
- If you have lost a loved one, join a support group and keep going through the holidays. The support groups bring great comfort from others who are going through the same thing. Or begin your own support group which is a rich and rewarding experience for the group facilitator.
- Take a vacation week after January 1st! You deserve it.
- Learn about emotional intelligence.
- "Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to accurately identify and understand one's own emotional reactions and those of others, and to regulate one's emotions and to use them to make good decisions and act effectively" Learning Matters.com
- If you are alone for the holidays, volunteer in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. You will feel good and won't be alone. The next time someone offers you an invitation, accept it. You choose how you want to spend the holidays and

you choose to be miserable or happy. Spend time with people who care about you and who you care about.

- Treat yourself as an important guest and put money into savings for yourself or purchase that expensive gift you always wanted. But Save Save Save
- Write your thoughts down if feeling blue or seek professional help.

#### References:

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching

FREE ONLINE BOOK DOWNLOAD: Dale Carnegie Secrets to Success. Excellent.

Emotional Intelligence

Activity Director Stress Reduction Tools

Job Satisfaction: Strategies to make work more gratifying.

Relatives visiting for the holidays: A survival Guide

Holiday Happiness and the Company You Keep

Holiday Stress Survival Kit

Self Growth

Improve Self Confidence and Self Esteem: Free 6 week course

Book: Why Make Yourself Crazy? 400 Strategies for a Stress Free Life. By G. Gaynor  
McTigue Book on Amazon



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