3 ways to tackle marriage stress

If your marriage is anything like mine, there's only one thing you can count on: perfect marital bliss 24/7! The holidays and other occasions never add an ounce of stress to our Rockwellian portrait of the perfect, Catholic American family.

If you believe that, I have a flying sleigh I'd like to sell you. For the rest of us, here are three ways to turn some of the most stressful marital moments into opportunities for a stronger union.

1. Get Over It – There is very simple prayer that goes, "Greed, anger and ignorance emerge end-lessly. I vow to end them." Say this prayer together.

It's important to acknowledge the first part of the prayer. Greed, anger and ignorance emerge endlessly. Those attributes are a persistent part of the human condition, and there's no avoiding them. After you've acknowledged that these vices emerge, work together on the second half of the prayer. End the miserly hoarding of wealth and compassion that can come with the holidays. End the anger at old hurts. End the ignorance of the needs of others at this most sacred time. Find examples of these vices in your own marriage, and vow to end them together.

2. Acknowledge Ambivalence – Ambivalence gets a bad rap, especially in marriage. Too often, "ambivalence" (having contradictory feelings about something) is confused with "apathy" (not caring).

As human beings, it's perfectly natural to feel conflicted about parts of our lives. Even Jesus in the garden showed some ambivalence about his forthcoming crucifixion. We are programmed to believe, though, that ambivalence is wishy-

washy. It is natural. Be gentle with one another in moments of ambivalence. While it is important not to become paralyzed by indecision, choices made in moments of uncertainty – especially when the choice is forced – can do a lot of damage to a marriage. When you're uncertain: wait.

3. Play or Pay – My wife and I used to scoff at other couples who kept a "date night." What kind of a healthy relationship has to schedule a standing appointment for fun? It was obvious to us that the spark and spontaneity was long gone from those marriages – that is, until we hit a really rough patch in our marriage. Each of us accused the other of taking us for granted. We never spent any "quality time" together. We were always working, or with the kids, or stressed out about a million other things. We looked around at the couples who had been diligent about their date nights (those losers), and we realized they were, as we say in our house, "clam happy." Make time for one another. Be intentional about your fun. You'll be glad you did.