

Holiday Stress

The holidays can be extremely enjoyable, but they also can be stressful for many individuals. A lot of people dread the pressure, planning and preparation that is involved when trying to create memorable holiday celebrations. A lot of this stress stems from our own thoughts and feelings regarding what is required of us during this time of year. Self-imposed expectations tend to produce the most frustration and anxiety. Our expectations may have formed since childhood, watching parents or other family members fuss and worry about everything turning out perfectly, or they may have developed from watching television and movies with “perfect families” having beautiful dinners, or they may have developed as a response to internal conflict. Some individuals just want to make everything lovely as a way to give thanks to family and friends. Regardless of the reasons it is important to develop coping skills to handle any associated anxiety. The list below includes ideas that may be beneficial to you as you plan and prepare for the holidays ahead. Remember that some of the skills and suggestions listed will be helpful to some people, but others may feel they won’t work for them. That’s okay because we are all different and we are not “One size fits all.” It is important, though, to keep an open mind when exploring techniques that are evidence based and may make it easier to cope during the holidays and all year long. Feel free to tweak the following suggestions to suit your needs.

Reduce Holiday Stress:

Prioritize sleep. Try to maintain your normal sleep routine if possible. Lack of rest may cause you to feel irritable and sluggish, and small issues may seem more taxing.

Create a New Tradition. If there have been changes in your life, e.g. a divorce, loss, or a move to a smaller home, create new traditions and new memories.

Help others. Helping others means helping yourself. It is a win-win situation. It is also a quick fix for loneliness, depression, and feelings of emptiness. Focus on others instead of yourself.

Take breaks as much as possible. Make sure to take at least a few five-minute breaks while shopping, wrapping gifts, cooking, etc. It may surprise you how a few minutes of sitting, or meditating will increase your energy and create a feeling of calm.

Allow yourself to be imperfect. It’s okay to make mistakes; we are all

Draw and Create. Draw or paint to express yourself and release stress in a non-threatening manner (Doodling is perfect if you do not have too much time). Doodling actually helps people better focus and problem solve!

Exercise for peace, energy, increased dopamine, and health.

Mindfulness – Try to be in the moment and do things “One mindfully.” Focus on what you are doing and do not multitask. When you are baking, bake, when you are wrapping gifts, wrap gifts. In this way you are reducing anxiety and deriving the most pleasure from your experiences. Be mindful (fully aware) of the here and now. Allow unpleasant thoughts to float away.

Get some air. Go outside even for a few minutes. Fresh air is soothing and invigorating. If you can find greenery such as green bushes or evergreen trees you may feel calmer by just looking at them. Nature is a potent medicine.

Acknowledge your feelings, but you don’t have to invite negative feelings for dinner. Acknowledge them and allow them to float away or place them on a train and imagine them riding away.

Lower expectations. If something goes wrong or the store does not have the gift you wanted to buy, acknowledge you are disappointed and buy something else. Remember what John Lennon said, “Life happens while you’re busy making other plans.”

Show yourself compassion. This is the time to show yourself, sometimes even more than you show others, compassion. We need to be our own best friend. Remember you are doing the best you can right now, and you are enough. Be kind to yourself and treat yourself the same as you would treat a best friend.

Ask others for help when needed. You do not need to do all the work by yourself. Asking for assistance is a strength and not a weakness.

Set boundaries. Set boundaries for others but also set boundaries for yourself, e.g. Bake one cake a night instead of three cakes, or find someone else to wash the floors, or do not allow yourself to stay up till 2:00AM cleaning.

Be assertive and Say “No” if needed. You are allowed to say “No” without an excuse.

Remember that what you see on television and in the movies is not real; everyone is not celebrating the holidays joyously with friends and family in the ideal house with beautiful linens and dishes, etc.

Avoid using too much alcohol or overeating, which may make you feel lethargic and increase guilt and depression. On the other hand, if you overeat and overindulge in general, leave yourself alone and try to begin anew the next day. Please check with your doctor if you drink and you are on medication.

Develop a holiday budget beforehand so finances do not become too stressful. In addition, making gifts and/or cards is less expensive and more meaningful.

Focus on what you have as opposed to what you feel you are missing in life.

Be realistic about what may happen during your celebration; milk will spill, someone might make a suggestion you don't like, someone may take out a cigarette in your smoke free home, or a family member or friend may call at the last minute to say they can't attend the gathering, etc.

Reframe negative thinking, e.g. “I am lying on the couch, and I am lazy” versus “I need to relax right now.”

Try to take short breaks, read a few pages of your favorite book or work on a puzzle or draw in an adult coloring book to decrease tension.

Gratitude. Be grateful for anything you may have right now, whether it be friends, family, a roof over your head, food to eat, etc.

Massage. *(1) If possible, treat yourself to a massage or give yourself a mini massage:

- Lower your shoulders away from your ears.
- Straighten your neck and back.
- Locate the base of your skull.
- Place the pointer and middle fingers of each hand in the center, fingertips touching.
- Apply gentle pressure and slide your fingers outward or downward, moving in the direction that feels best.

Move your fingers in small circular motions. Focus on the tense spots, along with the areas around it.

- Music. Play your favorite music to find calm and/or to energize and lift your spirits.
- Play with your pet to lessen stress and to enjoy yourself.

Laughter. Remember to try not to take yourself or everything that is happening too seriously. Holidays usually don't last too long. Ask yourself if what is happening right now will affect your life next week, next month, next year, etc.

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