

Tis' the Season of Stress

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No one is immune to stress, whether the experience is happy and exciting, or sad and traumatic. Stress may increase significantly if combined with time demands, illness, or financial issues, and the holidays do not automatically take away feelings of aloneness, sadness, frustration, anger, and fear.

Research suggests we experience more emotional highs and lows during the Christmas holiday than at any other time of the year. Children may be especially susceptible.^{1,2}

Our culture creates the expectation of “Hallmark” holidays, although we know that families are seldom greeting-card perfect. We recognize that there is more happiness as families get together and greater disappointment when people expect too much of homecomings and family parties.

Social expectations are a major source of the stress. Beginning with Thanksgiving and continuing through New Year’s Day, the season often brings unwelcome pressures, overwhelming exhaustion, and sometimes, depression. Stress and fatigue may result from over-commercialization, financial constraints, the inability to be with one’s family and friends, and unresolved conflicts.¹⁻³ Increased demands on time for shopping, parties, family reunions, and houseguests contribute to intense feelings and may result in stress responses such as headaches, overeating, disrupted sleep patterns, and excessive drinking.

Many individuals seek relief from increased stress in food, drugs, alcohol, or other substances. These measures can cause serious problems such as car accidents, family arguments, injuries at work, loss of productivity, and inappropriate behavior leading to legal consequences.^{3,4}

A 2009 self-reported survey focused on stress levels during the holiday season as defined across five categories: health, fitness, weight, personal relationships, and finances. The responses indicated that finances are the most likely cause of holiday stress. Men reported higher levels of anxiety than did women. Nearly one-half of women responded that they were moderately or significantly worried about their weight during the holidays; men were significantly less so. Men and women reported moderate to significant anxiety over being able to provide a happy holiday and gifts for families.⁵

Coping strategies reported by the respondents included exercise and more sleep. Slightly more than one-half of respondents said they will spend less money and stick to a budget to reduce stress this season.

Holidays Can Be Hard on Children

Most of us know how easy it is to overextend our time and energy during the holidays—at work and because of social obligations. Add in the stress of gift buying within a limited budget, and we feel tremendous emotional fatigue. This often means we have fewer emotional resources to manage our relationships with our families, especially our children.

For many children, the holidays are happy, fun, and exciting. However, children are not immune to stress. Studies have found that if parents experience holiday stress, their children pick up those feelings. Stress may be caused by having to change work routines or child care arrangements, stretching the budget, entertaining children, or dealing with older children staying home alone.²

Any situation that requires the child to adapt quickly or change can cause stress. Children learn how to respond to stress by what they see and experience. While holiday disruptions may seem insignificant to adults, situations that require even small changes can have enormous effects on a child’s feelings of safety and security, especially in very young children. Plans and celebrations may also be complicated by divorce, separation, or remarriage; children may be separated from parents due to ongoing military service.

Short-term behavioral changes or changes in mood and sleep patterns, bedwetting, or complaints of stomach pains and headaches may be indications of stress in children. If the problems continue for an extended period, professional help may be necessary.

Studies indicate that it is important to find some time to relax and enjoy this time of the year as well as help your child cope with holiday stress. What most children really want is your time and attention.^{2,3}

Experts recommend that we all remember what the holidays are really all about and include your children in planning activities.



Oh to be a child when magic sparkles and secrets hover in the air.

Anonymous

Constantly changing plans or last-minute decisions can increase stress. Try to maintain routines. We all need some degree of control and predictability.

Finding Balance and Joy amid the Stress

When you are relaxed and happy, those around you also feel less anxiety. Smile and laugh and find magic with the season. Laughter is still the best way to beat stress and change everyone's mood. Finding enchantment, joy, and amusement in decorating, singing, preparing a unique meal, or doing anything fun and playful are great gifts to give yourself and others. Take a walk on a starlit night. Enjoy the first snowflakes falling, a crackling fire on a rainy night, and your children's smiles.

Make sure you all get plenty of rest. Although it may be exciting to stay up late, lack of sleep often leads to increased irritability. Also, factor in all of the sugary holiday treats and provide healthy meals and snacks.

Show compassion and generosity. Your behavior teaches by example, and with compassion, we step beyond our own anxiety and frustration. We realize things are better than we thought. Studies also show the easiest way to reduce stress is with gratitude.⁶ An appreciation for the people and pets you love, the things you have in your life, and the small and large blessings that occur on a daily basis will uplift your spirit.

Keeping physically fit can also help you avoid holiday stress. The continual excitement of seasonal activities can keep adrenaline flowing and disrupt sleep. If you travel, especially across time zones, physical and emotional fatigue becomes a major concern.

Many healthcare providers are prone to perfectionism. Pause and take time for yourself. Finding the balance between self-care and caring for others is critical and prevents you from burning out. It also helps you to manage the increased stress that family members may experience.

European researchers have found that those with a heavy workload or a high sense of responsibility are also at risk for an emerging syndrome identified as "leisure sickness." The preliminary study found that many of those affected appear to be those with perfectionism, eagerness to achieve, and an overdeveloped sense of responsibility to their work, making it difficult for them to "switch off" out of

work. Symptoms like fatigue, muscular pains, and nausea are most common during weekends and on holiday. Cold and flu-like symptoms are particularly common during holidays.⁷

Continuing research is attempting to identify the reason why certain people are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon. Much of the work is focused on mechanisms that control the body's defense system.

Celebrate What Is Important

The magic of the season can make it the most wonderful time of the year. Yet, there is no ideal holiday, only the one you choose to make. It is a reflection of your values, desires, affections, and traditions as seen through the eyes of your friends and loved ones. Give them a gift of your time, love, memories, and sharing the spirit of the season.■

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