

It's the Holidays-I'm stressed!

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Yes the holiday season is almost here. Holiday stress and depression are often the result of feeling out of control in three areas of life. Understanding this can help you plan ahead so the holidays are less stressful and more enjoyable.

The three main triggers of holiday stress are:

- **Relationships.** Relationships can cause turmoil, conflict or stress at any time. But tensions are often heightened during the holidays. Family misunderstandings and conflicts can intensify — especially if you are spending more time with additional family members. Conflicts and personality differences, as well as individual needs and interests, may begin to create tension. On the other hand, if you're facing the holidays without a loved one, you may find yourself especially lonely or sad. So it is important to take time for yourself, pick and choose your battles and realize that we may not agree with others' behaviors but we can choose to treat them with respect and recognize differences. In some cases we may need to set boundaries and say "no" to certain activities that are planned.
- **Finances.** Your financial situation can cause stress at any time of the year. But overspending during the holidays on gifts, travel, food and entertainment may increase stress as you try to make ends meet while ensuring that everyone on your gift list is happy. You may find yourself spending more than your budget allows. So as you are making your gift list be sure to set spending limits that are within your budget. You may also want to look at making some gifts, shopping for the lowest prices by checking in several stores or online and directly shipping your purchases from the manufacturer rather than paying shipping costs yourself.
- **Physical demands.** The hectic pace of shopping, attending social gatherings and preparing holiday meals can wipe you out. So it is important to start early, pace yourself and say "no" when you have too many activities or commitments. If you are not able to say "no" look at ways to ease the workload. This may include buying prepared foods, baking and freezing items ahead of time, such as Christmas cookies or other desserts, and purchasing

gift items throughout the year. Feeling exhausted makes the holidays less enjoyable so taking care of yourself through proper diet, exercise and rest is key for happiness.

Coping skills you can use:

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** If a loved one is absent or has passed away realize that it's normal to feel sadness or grief. It's OK now and then to take time to cry and to express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
- **Seek support.** If you feel isolated or down, seek out family members and friends, or community, religious or social activities. Spend time with others who are supportive and can offer companionship. Consider volunteering at a community or religious function. Getting involved and helping others can lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. Also, enlist support for organizing holiday gatherings, as well as meal preparation and cleanup. You don't have to do it alone.
- **Be realistic.** As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Hold on to those traditions that work for you but let go of those that create stress or evoke bad memories of past experiences. If you are unable to have the whole family together use technology to stay in touch.
- **Set differences aside.** Learn to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Practice forgiveness. Set aside issues until a more appropriate time if able. With stress and activity levels high, the holidays might not be conducive to making quality time for relationships. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they may be feeling the effects of holiday stress too.
- **Stick to your budget.** Before you go shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend on gifts and other items. Then stick to it rather than overspending and worrying for months to come as you try to pay the bills. Don't try to buy happiness with big gifts. Give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.
- **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make one big food-shopping trip. That will help prevent a last-minute scramble to buy forgotten items. Expect travel delays and give yourself plenty of time.

- **Learn to say no.** Believe it or not, people will understand if you can't do certain projects or activities. If you say yes only to what you really want to do, you'll avoid feeling resentful, bitter and overwhelmed. If it's really not possible to say no try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.
- **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a dietary free-for-all. Some indulgence is OK, but overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on high carbohydrate foods or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and schedule time for physical activity.
- **Take a breather.** Schedule some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Steal away to a quiet place, even if it's to the bathroom for a few moments of solitude. Take a walk at night and look at the stars. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner peace.
- **Rethink resolutions.** Resolutions can set you up for failure if they are not realistic. Don't resolve to change your whole life to make up for past excess. Instead, try to return to basic, healthy lifestyle routines. Set smaller, more specific goals with a reasonable time frame.
- **Forget about perfection.** Holiday TV specials are filled with happy endings. But in real life, people don't usually resolve problems within an hour or two. Something always comes up. You may get stuck late at the office and miss your daughter's school play, your sister may dredge up an old argument, your partner may burn the cookies, and your mother may criticize how you're raising the kids. All in the same day. Accept imperfections in yourself and in others.
- **Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for several weeks, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.