What Is Holiday Stress?

PLUS:

3 Tips for a Happier Holiday Season
The mission of AIS is to improve the health of the community and the world by setting the standard of excellence of stress management in education, research, clinical care and the workplace. Diverse and inclusive, The American Institute of Stress educates medical practitioners, scientists, health care professionals and the public; conducts research; and provides information, training and techniques to prevent human illness related to stress.

AIS provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, creates and transmits innovative knowledge, improves human health, and provides leadership to the world on stress related topics.
CONTENTMENT

We value opinions of our readers.
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AIS Daily Life Stress Board

Chaired by Dr. Michel Woodbury-Farina, the role of this board is to develop initiatives and communications to serve the stress management needs of all people.

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More Facebook friends, more problems?

A small study suggests that for adolescents, their number of Facebook friends may be related to their stress levels, with more than 300 friends associated with higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

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Can having pets in the office reduce workplace stress?

Purina sure thinks so. Employees at the Purina Petcare office in Sydney, Australia are encouraged to bring their pets to work in order to help reduce stress and tension. Purina cites research from Virginia Commonwealth University published in the International Journal of Workplace Health Management in 2012, which found employees felt less stressed throughout the day when a dog accompanied them to work.

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Stress may sabotage self-control

In a study conducted at University of Zurich's Laboratory for Social and Neural Systems Research, researchers placed human volunteers in a similar food choice scenario to explore how stress can alter the brain to impair self-control when people are confronted with a choice. Participants' brains in this study exhibited altered patterns of connectivity between regions including the amygdala, striatum, and the dorsolateral and ventromedial prefrontal cortex, essentially reducing individuals' ability to exercise self-control over food choices.

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Stress levels on the rise in Ireland

A survey from the Irish Association of Counseling and Psychotherapy found three out of four people surveyed admitted to suffering from stress, compared to 71 per cent in 2013. The main cause of stress was money – identified by 38 per cent of respondents, up from 33 per cent in 2013. Work was also a significant cause of stress – up to 30 per cent from 27 per cent in 2013.

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3 Gifts To Give Yourself
Turning Holiday Stress to Joy

By Dr. Cindi Ackrill MD, FAIS

**Awareness** – How are you right now, really? Physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually? Where are your energy leaks? What do you need to be at your best?

As the length and urgency of your to-do lists ramp up, it becomes harder and harder to remember that **YOU are the biggest part of the equation in getting it all done**. Devoting just 2 of the 1440 minutes in a day to pause, breathe and notice can save a lot of stress and make you more efficient.

This season take a proactive stance instead of waiting until you hit the wall, feel pain, or screw up something. (Yes, whether you want to admit it or not, we have all done something less than stellar under pressure- the unfiltered “blurt,” memory lapse or over-indulgence?) **Check out the power of 2 minutes of checking in!**

**Boldness** – Once you are more aware of your needs, don’t sit around waiting for someone to guess them...**speak up!** Use non-violent communication skills to use your voice in ways that honor everyone as you ask for what you need. For example, have a conversation now with the family about what everyone needs, expects in the next 3 weeks to make the holidays more joyful.

**Sustainable excellence in leadership demands the courage to take care of yourself**, even when that means using your voice when it would be easier to stay silent. Avoiding conflict or waiting until resentment surfaces or you are too worn...
out to use effective emotional intelligence costs you and others much more in the long run. I spend a lot of coaching time around issues that could have been avoided by the courage to speak up sooner.

Investing in your needs invests in your value to everyone you serve.

Extra credit: use your voice to ask others how they are and what they need.

**Compassion for yourself** – “Tis the season to show compassion for others-now try some on yourself! A shocking number of us motivate ourselves by “shoulds” and a stream of negative internal dialogue that would be disturbing if spoken aloud.

Kristin Neff, Ph.D. presents great research on the power of self-compassion to improve your productivity and health and reduce your stress. Need convincing? Give yourself the gift of taking 20 minutes to listen to her TED talk below or listen to or read her book, *Self-Compassion*.

We know the power of a little kindness shown to others- experiment with its power when turned inward!

This holiday season put YOU on your to-do list, and remember that self-care is not selfish! It is a proven stress strategy and a way to find more joy for you and your loved ones.
Most of us look forward to the holiday season because of the bonding experiences and wonderful memories that come with it. The gatherings with family and friends; the music, decorations, and gifts; and the deeper feelings of peace and sense of meaning that come with the holidays themselves are all beautiful aspects of the season. However, the holiday season is also synonymous with stress for most people. A holiday stress poll conducted by the APA a few years ago showed that fully 8 out of 10 Americans anticipate stress during the holiday season, and those with children were especially likely to expect stress. A poll I conducted on my website (http://stress.about.com) yielded similar results: out of over 2000 responses, more than 80% reported feeling stressed during the holiday season, and almost half of respondents reported feeling “very stressed.” There are many factors that contribute to stress during the holiday season, making the expectation of stress a valid one. Here are some of the most common culprits:

**Too Much Activity**

We expect the season to be exciting, special, and memorable, and it usually is for most people. But we often underestimate the sheer amount of hours that the holiday activities take out of our schedules,
which are often packed already. Over the course of a few busy weeks, we have gifts to buy, wrap, and send; parties to plan or at least attend; cards to write and mail; and even trips to take, in many cases. Without counting other traditions like caroling, viewing lights, decorating, and baking, this keeps most of us quite busy, which can keep us feeling like we have less time to rest. Interestingly, when we wonder why we are feeling like we need some leisure time, it may seem odd even to us that we feel we need a break from all of these fun activities.

Money

Finances pressure is often listed as a top stressor during this season. Holiday parties, gift exchanges, cards, trips, and other traditions and obligations can be a wonderful way to connect with others and let them know we care, but they all take time and money—often more than we realize or can comfortably spare without having to sacrifice in other areas of our lives. Many people feel pressured to buy gifts they can’t afford, or don’t realize they can’t afford until they find themselves shouldering debt in January.

Too-High Expectations

We often try to create holiday celebrations that are no less than magical, because we really want to give our loved ones a holiday to remember. This puts a lot of pressure on our celebrations, however. And a new source of stress comes from social media; we tend to see pictures and status updates of our friends’ holiday memories in real time, and compare those picture-perfect snapshots to our own behind-the-scenes stress. These comparisons can create stress because we are comparing other people’s best moments to our own worst ones, and wondering if our experiences measure up. Meeting our own expectations can be more challenging than fulfilling the wishes of those we love; we often put the greatest pressure on ourselves to create a “perfect” holiday experience.

Relationship Challenges

There is often stress mixed with joy at family gatherings, as large numbers of people come together—often after traveling long distances—and spend time with family members they love but don’t always see. Any unresolved conflicts or just conflicting needs or personality types can contribute to stress, not only during family gatherings, but before and after as well, particularly if there are heavy expectations involved. The flip side of this, which doesn’t always get as much press, is the loneliness that many people feel during the holidays if they don’t have enough of these celebrations to attend, or enough people to enjoy the holidays with. This is a significant stressor for some people, as everyone around them is reveling in togetherness with family and friends.

Unhealthy Stress Management Behaviors

When we get busy with holiday activities, we often skip workouts, “down time,” and sleep—activities that tend to restore us and help us to stay resilient toward stress. We also may fall into the trap of managing stress in unhealthy ways, like indulging to excess with food or alcohol as a way to cope.
The Importance Of Holiday Stress Management

With all of the extra activities, raised expectations to meet (our own and others’), and higher expenses, coupled with less sleep and greater stress reactivity, it’s no wonder so many of us find ourselves stressed during the holiday season. People just don’t always know what to do to avoid or manage this stress, but effective stress management is especially important during the holidays. Stress levels that remain too high for too long can lead to lowered immunity. Pair this with the travel and togetherness of the holiday season, and you can more likely wind up with a cold or the flu right when you want it the least! Aside from increased odds of health issues, unmanaged stress can lead to anxiety rather than joy, conflict instead of bonding, and holiday memories that you’d rather forget. When we’re stressed, we are more likely to eat the wrong things, have trouble getting quality sleep, grow impatient more quickly, spend too much, and even drink too much. All of these reactions to stress can lead to more stress, and a negative cycle that can create an unnecessarily negative holiday experience.

How To Cope With Holiday Stress

The difference between experiencing the holiday season as “exciting” and “overwhelming” can often lie in how we manage our schedules and our attitudes. Simply knowing our limits and trying to prioritize those commitments that bring us the most joy and excitement, can help. This is because, once a certain threshold of stress is reached, virtually everything seems more stressful, and we tend to be less effective in handling the stressful events we do experience. It can be very helpful to pay attention to what feels the most stressful, and take steps to minimize your obligations in these areas. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about holiday season stress is to focus on what really matters to you about the holiday itself, and letting go of the activities that create more stress than positive feelings for you. The following are some specific tips that can help in minimizing stressors, and the impact of stress:

- Be sure to take care of yourself, especially if your days become hectic. Carve out time not only for sleep and exercise, but also for quiet relaxation. This can help you to savor the season and keep yourself from feeling overwhelmed.

- Focus more on connecting with others in meaningful ways than on following traditions to a tee. Keep the traditions that mean the most to you and your family, and let go of those that aren’t worth the effort.
To save money on holiday gifts, try to think of things that may cost less but carry more meaning for the recipient. Then include a card with a heartfelt message or treasured memory. Truly, it’s the thought that counts, and creating extra debt for 2016 will also create extra stress. Sometimes the gifts that mean the most are among the least expensive.

It may not be possible to avoid difficult people or draining obligations, but setting boundaries can help keep stress levels manageable. Limit time spent with those who create anxiety for you, or shop online rather than going to the mall if holiday shopping leads to stress or impulse purchases.

Don’t attempt to follow a strict diet amidst the tempting holiday parties (unless you can do this easily), but don’t completely succumb to the cookies and pies. Eat small portions and try to fill up on healthier choices first. Nutritious choices help with stress management, and can also keep you closer to fitness goals you may have in the new year.

Be careful with comparisons, both between your own holiday celebrations and others’, and between your ideal situations versus your actual holiday experiences. Appreciate the special moments of your holiday season, and enjoy them to the fullest.

Don’t ignore stress triggers (anticipate and manage them as much as possible), but do try to focus on the positive as much as possible. Savor what you can of these holiday activities, and you’ll have less stress as well as more positive memories.

It really helps to have two kinds of stress management in place: something that can help you minimize stress or reverse your stress response once you’re triggered (like breathing exercises or quick meditations), and regular habits that build resilience to stress (like exercise or journaling). And, again, self-care is key: be sure to get enough sleep, even if it means altering plans, and maintain a healthy diet to keep your energy levels up.

If holiday season stress has affected your enjoyment of the holidays in the past, you can take charge of how the season will go this year. By making even a few small changes, you can increase the fun and enjoyment you experience this year, and minimize the stress. Happy Holidays!
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The American Institute of Stress is a non-profit organization established in 1978 at the request of Dr. Hans Selye (the Founder of the Stress Concept) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on all stress related subjects. AIS Founding Fellows include:

Paul Rosch  Linus Pauling  Alvin Toffler  Bob Hope  Michael DeBakey  Herbert Benson  Charles Spielberger

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