



Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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How to Handle Holiday Stress

Adapted from Matt Scult, Ph.D.

For some, the holidays can be the most wonderful time of the year, filled with family, celebrations, and gifts. For others, these same things can have the opposite effect causing anxiety, loneliness, and, more often than not, stress.

The American Psychiatric Association recently released a survey showing 31 percent of adults say they expect to feel more stressed during these holidays compared to last year. The reality here is that holidays can bring as much stress as they do joy. And that's okay. What is important to remember is that we take care of ourselves and manage that stress in healthy ways.

So what are the best ways to de-stress as we enter into the chaos of the holidays? How can we manage caring for ourselves when we're focused on others? I spoke with my colleagues at Modern Health to get tips on handling stress over the coming weeks.

Be Honest With Yourself & Accept Imperfection

According to Jessica Watrous, clinical psychologist and Director of Clinical & Scientific Affairs at Modern Health, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves and our loved ones during the holidays to make things "perfect," and when circumstances fail to meet this unrealistic expectation, it can leave us feeling frustrated or disappointed.

We have to be honest with ourselves about what we care about during the holiday season, how much time, energy, and money we have available, and acknowledge unrealistic expectations. By being honest with ourselves,

we can actually cultivate more peace and joy during the holiday season. I recommend writing down what you're imagining for this holiday season and see if you can do a reality check on those expectations (e.g., shifting "everyone should all be happy and relaxed" to "there will likely be a mix of stressful moments and moments of joy.").

Avoid Social Overload & Set Boundaries

Social obligations can quickly become overwhelming during the holiday season, including potentially challenging relationships with close and extended family. Additionally, as we enter the third pandemic holiday season and many people are forgoing masks in places we previously wore them and getting together indoors where we formerly avoided it, COVID-related stress can contribute to feeling overwhelmed.

Watrous shares that even if there aren't concerns around varying tolerances to risk or relationship strains, just being around people as much as we are during the holiday season can be draining—even for those who usually enjoy socializing. Too many activities, even fun activities, can culminate in holiday stress leaving us feeling frazzled rather than fulfilled.

Ask yourself questions about which activities you want to attend instead of which you feel obligated to attend. I would encourage you to be aware of your limitations and give yourself permission to set boundaries so that those activities you partake in.

For activities that feel more like an obligation than a pleasure, see if you can set limits within those, perhaps going for a pre-designated amount of time or avoiding them altogether. If you don't think you can decline them, see if you can focus on something that you might enjoy about the experience.

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Sensible Spending Now Saves Stress Later

We're all experiencing or witnessing the news headlines rolling in, focusing on inflation, a looming economic recession, and resulting layoffs sweeping the globe. According to Watrous, it can be painful to experience financial stress that negatively impacts our ability to do all of the things we would like to do, especially when it comes to children and the holidays.

It can be helpful to remember that the commercial aspect of the holidays, such as gifts, may not be the reason you, your family, or your children are the most excited about the holidays. What other things do you enjoy about the holidays? What childhood memories do you have around the holiday season?

Focusing on the less commercial reasons, whether religious, family-oriented, or simply seasonal, can remind us of less financially burdensome activities that give our holidays meaning. One great way to re-focus our holidays away from commercialization is through volunteering our time to help support and take care of others.

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Practice Self-Compassion

Clinical psychologist and Clinical Strategy Lead of Mental Health Equity at Modern Health, Tiffany Chang, shared that practicing self-compassion, particularly during the holiday season, is important. It allows us to recognize pain as part of what it means to be human and encourages us to be gentle and tender towards ourselves and move towards a place of kindness and care.

When practicing self-compassion, it is important to reflect on how you are talking to yourself and treating yourself during this time. You might practice talking to yourself in the way that you would talk to a loved friend. We often forget to extend loving support during challenging times to ourselves when it comes easily to us to take care of friends this way. You might also write a letter to yourself saying what a caring and encouraging

friend might say to you at this moment. After writing this letter, take time to really savor this letter and feel the compassionate and comforting words.

Have A Self-Care Plan

Chang recommended making a self-care plan for the holiday season so that you have resources and coping tools close to hand. Remember to also maintain the self-care plan you may already have in place—if you're already in therapy, continue going. If you're taking medications, keep taking them. Be mindful of changes in your alcohol intake, eating habits, and sleep habits during this time. If you practice meditation, build it into your schedule over the holidays. While it is the season of giving, don't deprioritize yourself.

When you start to feel stress or anxiety creep into your day, carve out time to walk away and engage in a pleasurable activity or use mindfulness techniques to bring you back to the present moment and notice how your experience changes from one moment to the next.

Remember FCH EAP Is Here For Support

Having access to mental health and counseling support is important. FCH EAP is here to help all year, and we understand there can be a heightened need during the holiday season. Our team of qualified clinical experts are available 24/7 to assess your specific concerns and develop tailored plans of action.

In addition to being a resource to cope with holiday stress, FCH EAP also offers a variety of assistance services such as eldercare and childcare consultations, financial and legal consultations, ID theft protection, home ownership program, and trainings.

References:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-big-reframe/202212/how-handle-holiday-stress>