



Your EAP Newsletter brought to you by



National Stress-Free Holidays Month

The month between Thanksgiving and Christmas is cited as being the most stress-filled time of the year. Combine seasonal family commitments, traveling, shopping and baking with everyday stressors like commuting and working and it is no wonder many people become overwhelmed with tension and anxiety.

December has been named the National Stress-Free Family Holidays Month in order to increase awareness of the problems that anxiety can cause during the holiday season. This article lists looks at some causes of holiday stress and offers some useful tips for dealing with seasonal pressures.

Stress

The causes of stress are usually occurrences and events that make people feel angry, helpless, lonely, sad or frustrated. The amount of stress a person feels depends on the individual's personality. Some people feel stress during their morning commute, during meetings at work and at home with their families. Other people seem to walk through life without a care in the world, even when the circumstances around them are chaotic and pressure-filled. These people either are not affected by stress, or have come up with a way to handle it.

Stress can effectively be dealt with in a number of ways. People can avoid situations where they know they will feel uncomfortable, angry or upset. People can also go into these situations with a different mindset, trying to be more adaptive and understanding to circumstances that normally cause them tension.

Signs of Stress

To a certain degree, feeling stressed is a normal, healthy response to life's events and challenges. The ability to react under stress is crucial for human survival. However, over time the body's continued response to constant stress can lead to physical and emotional problems. Here are some physical signs that a person is experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress:

- Hyperventilation, or rapid and shallow breathing
- Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Tiredness and fatigue
- Backaches and neck pains
- Headaches and migraines
- High blood pressure
- Trouble sleeping
- Irregular sleep schedule
- Chronic heartburn or ulcers

The behavioral symptoms that a person is experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress include:

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Being socially withdrawn
- Unable to concentrate
- Forgetfulness
- "Nervous" habits like biting fingernails or grinding teeth
- Abuse of alcohol and drugs

Causes of Holiday Stress

It is easy to see why the holiday season can be stressful; there are many more situations and events that cause people to feel sadness, anger and frustration during this time of the year.

Here is a list of some common causes of holiday stress:

- Travel. Whether on the highway or in an airport, travel during the holiday season is always more crowded and stress-filled than at any other time of year.
- Shopping. The crowds at the malls and in the stores can make the biggest humanitarians loathe society.
- Family. Not every family relationship is subject matter for a Norman Rockwell painting. Problems, disagreements and fights happen, often when family members gather for the holidays.
- Hosting. Some people are overwhelmed by the duties involved in hosting holiday parties and events. Relatives and friends who come to town for extended visits can also cause stress.
- Trying to do too much. Many people pack their day planners until there is not 15 minutes of free time available. They are always on the go, never taking time to catch their breath.
- Trying to be perfect. Perfection is a nice goal to strive for, but a more reasonable and attainable goal is to strive for above-average.
- The shorter days. The amount of daylight available around the holidays is minimal. Many people feel they have to fit as many activities as possible into what little daylight there is, creating stress.
- Being alone. Loneliness is a cause of stress for many people, especially those who have lost loved ones or who are away from their families during the holidays.

Ways to Eliminate Holiday Stress

Here are some things many people do to eliminate holiday stress from their lives:

- Plan ahead. If you are traveling, try to avoid scheduling your travel for busy times. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving and the days leading up to Christmas are historically hectic travel days. If you can, schedule your trip for a few days sooner to avoid the congestion and crowds.
- Shop smartly. Make a shopping list so you only have to go to the mall and other stores one time. Do not overspend, and avoid prolonged searches for "the perfect gift." To avoid stores altogether try buying gifts online.

- Prioritize your holiday events. You cannot possibly make it to every holiday party and event, so make some decisions about which ones you want to attend. Do not burden yourself with trying to do everything. Only do the things that are important to you.
- Allow others to help. If you are a do-it-yourself kind of person try delegating tasks to other people so you do not crumble under the burden of having too much to do.
- Recognize when stress is negatively affecting you. Be aware of how you are feeling physically and emotionally. Learn to self-diagnose when stressors in life are pushing your buttons and use some relaxation or deep-breathing techniques to alleviate the anxiety.
- Recognize if stress is getting to others. Keep an eye on your family and friends, and volunteer to help or assist anybody who looks frazzled.
- Watch what you eat. Many people overeat around the holidays, and the weight they gain can cause stress. Also, pay attention to how much caffeine and alcohol you are consuming. Caffeine and alcohol use can contribute to stressful feelings because both drugs alter how people act, react and feel physically and emotionally.
- Exercise. Many people relieve the stress in their lives through physical exercise. In the winter it might be harder to go outside for a jog, but there are plenty of things people can do indoors to raise their heart rates and burn energy. These activities include aerobics, Pilates, spin classes and yoga.
- Schedule a "What holiday?" day. Make some time in your schedule where you do not do any seasonal activities like shopping for gifts, baking cookies or attending any parties. Spend the time with family and friends doing activities unrelated to the holiday season.
- Let bygones be bygones. Try to put personal disagreements with family members aside during the holidays. Why waste time opening old wounds when trying to heal them is a much healthier pursuit?
- Make time for yourself. Plan a day where you do things you want at your own pace. It will be easier to deal with the chaotic holidays if you occasionally take time to rest, relax and recharge your batteries.
- Do not try to have the perfect holiday season. Trying to be perfect is as fruitless a quest as trying to control the weather. There are too many variables in life for perfection to be a reasonable goal. Accept that there will be problems, errors and unexpected events and accept the season for what it is: a time to enjoy the company of family and friends.

Call us for the support that you need. 1-888-290-4EAP (TDD: 1800-697-0353) or go to www.GuidanceResources.com. Agency ID: FEDSOURCE

©2004 ComPsych® Corporation. All rights reserved. This information is for educational purposes only. It is always important to consult with the appropriate professional on medical, legal, behavioral or other issues. As you read this information, it is your responsibility to make sure that the facts and ideas apply to your situation