

10 Tips for Holiday Stress

Words like “jolly”, “cheer”, and “merry” are often used to describe the holidays season. But depleted bank accounts and additional activities can also trigger anxiety, depression and most of all – stress.

The AP recently conducted a poll assessing financial concerns as Americans enter the holiday season in the midst of a global recession. Of those polled, 50 percent said they are suffering “some” debt related stress and 22 percent said they are feeling “quite a bit” or “a great amount” of debt-related stress. Gift giving will only increase stress for those who are already experiencing financial hardships.

Finances are not the only trigger of holiday stress. An increase in holiday-related activities and demands often leave people overwhelmed and exhausted. Plus, not all holiday gatherings are filled with good times and laughter. Strained relationships, family misunderstandings and loss of loved ones are often heightened during the holiday season.

The world-renowned Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota has conducted significant research relating to stress around the holiday season. Their staff compiled a list of 10 tips that provide valuable tools to prevent stress and depression over the holidays.

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
- **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.
- **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videotapes.
- **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression too.
- **Stick to a budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Try these alternatives: Donate to a charity in someone's name, 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 your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.
- **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every

project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, 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 free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity.
- **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.
- **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 a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Thrive Counseling Center, formerly Family Service & Mental Health Center of Oak Park & River Forest, has served the mental health and social service needs of the community for 111 years. The organization is at the forefront of behavioral healthcare in the Chicago metropolitan area and provides a comprehensive array of mental health and wellness programs to address a variety of needs. Thrive Counseling Center is located in the Ray A. Kroc Center for Family Services, 120 S. Marion Street, Oak Park, IL 60302.

Additional information about Thrive programs and services are available by calling (708) 383-7500, and at www.thrivecc.org.

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