Stress, Depression and the Holidays: Tips for Coping

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

By Mayo Clinic staff

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of demands — parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few. But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 videos.

4. Set aside differences. Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

Take control of the holidays

Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.

Coping With Holiday Stress

A time of festivity, parties, shopping, entertaining, religious observances, family gatherings, and decorating, the holiday season can be full of excitement and promise. However, with this time of year inevitably comes stress.

For many, the first signs of holiday stress emerge around Halloween, when stores start stocking shelves with Christmas decorations and candies. People begin to feel the clock ticking and that there is not enough time to fit in everything. We often have higher expectations for this time of year than for any other, which places even more pressure on us and increases the likelihood we may end up disappointed.

Signs of stress may include feeling impatient, worried, cranky, and, in some cases, depressed. People might experience sleep or appetite disturbances, or other physical complaints such as muscle tension, headache, fatigue, or stomach aches. Children are not immune to this stress. Parents set the pace for their kids, and they, too, can feel the sense of urgency.

Following are some tips to help you minimize holiday stress. Major themes in these recommendations include:

Simplify.

Let go of unrealistic expectations, particularly the desire for perfection.

Invest your energies wisely.

What does this holiday season mean to you?

Think about what your holidays mean to you:

What are you celebrating?

What values do you think of when you think of your holiday? Are you practicing them?

Consider past holidays. Where did you invest your energy? Was it worth it?

As a family, consider the traditions and rituals that you practice. Which ones do you enjoy?

Which ones bring your family closer together? Sometimes the simplest rituals are the most meaningful. It's okay to re-evaluate past traditions and let go.

Gift giving

Set a holiday budget.

Do not equate love with cost and quantity of gifts.

Consider giving the gift of your time and service.

Ask people what they want instead of searching for the perfect gift.

Shop early so there is more of a selection and you have time to really choose.

Don't head toward the mall in 5 o'clock traffic or during peak times.

Shop on the Internet.

Entertaining

Who says the house has to be perfectly clean or elaborately decorated?

Who says you need to serve a gourmet meal?

Ask others to bring their favorite dish.

Use paper plates.

Buy prepared foods.

Cook and freeze foods ahead of time.

Think simple, and focus on the purpose of the get together.

Getting together with family

Evaluate past holidays and traditions, and consider any changes in the family structure (e.g., marriages, remarriages, divorce). Be flexible and willing to let go of ideas of the way things "should be."

Share responsibilities so the pressure does not fall on one person (e.g., rotate homes, potluck).

Plan to visit some friends and family soon after the holidays. There is no need to squeeze everything in before the New Year.

Don't get hung up on celebrating on the actual holiday. Time together is what matters.

Allow enough time to relax and recover after visiting with others. Children need this, too.

Tell your family about your commitments so you are not struggling against their expectations.

Travel after rush hour. When driving long distances, give yourself time to stop and rest.

Managing your time

Consider past holidays and where you invested your energy. Decide to rid yourself of the things you dislike about the holidays.

Don't spend the holidays just fulfilling obligations. Pick and chose what you want to do rather than what you think others expect you to do.

Set priorities and let go of impossible goals. Don't try to complete everything at once.

Don't over-schedule yourself and your family. Leave some time unplanned to relax and just be at home with each other.

Don't accept every invitation. Chose the events you want to attend.

Ask others to help you complete chores. (Don't wait until offered; you may be disappointed.)

Take breaks.

Take care of yourself

Get adequate sleep. Eat regular meals. Don't abandon your exercise routine.

Plan pleasurable activities each day.

Don't let your "to-do" list control you. Set realistic goals for yourself.

Spend time with supportive people.

Take breaks. Rest when your body tells you to.

Practice relaxation exercises (i.e., stretching, deep breathing, yoga, meditation).

Give yourself the gift of reflection and of being in the moment

One of the best ways to slow down the hectic pace of the holidays is to take advantage of opportunities to wait. We have to wait in line in traffic, at malls, in the grocery store, in doctor's offices. Opportunities to wait are even greater during this time of year. Rather than spending that time feeling irritated and looking at your watch and to-do list, you might try the following:

Embrace this time as a gift.

Use this waiting time for reflection on the meaning of life and on the meaning of the holiday season.

Observe how you are feeling emotionally (e.g., irritable, frantic, impatient) and physically (e.g., tense, hunched shoulders, clenched fists, tapping foot).

Examine where your thoughts are.

Challenge yourself to let go of your agenda and appreciate the moment.

Observe those around you. Interact with someone.

Practice slow, deep breathing. Focus on your breath and your belly as it rises and falls.

The holiday blues

For some, the holidays can be a depressing time. Feelings of sadness, loneliness, and anger can intensify when contrasted with the joy expected of the holidays. Factors that can contribute to holiday depression include:

Associating the holidays with unresolved family issues or a painful childhood experience

Having an expectation that you "should" feel happy

Facing the loss of a loved one with whom you have shared the holidays

Having unrealistic expectations of family and friends

Being away from family and friends; feeling isolated from others

Reflecting on losses or disappointments over the past year

Coping with changes in family obligations or disruptions of traditions due to recent marriages, remarriages, divorce, or death

Drinking more alcohol, a depressant, which is more available during the holidays

Coping with holiday depression

If there has been a recent loss, you may want to do something different like take a vacation with a family member or friend.

Spend time with people who care about you. Do not isolate yourself. If you feel there is no one available, then reach out to others in need.

Attend a religious service or community gathering (e.g., candle lighting ceremony, public concerts).

Allow yourself some time to reflect on your losses, and feel the sadness and loneliness.

Family and friends may be concerned; let them know what you need from them.

Get help if you need it. Talk to your doctor, a mental health professional, or minister or rabbi.

Make some plans for after the New Year to help avoid the post-holiday let down.

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