



Developing a Better Understanding

COPING WITH STRESS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays can be a time for joy and connecting with friends and loved ones, but they can also bring stress and sadness. According to the American Psychological Association, 38% of people surveyed said their stress increased during the holiday season, which can lead to physical illness, depression, anxiety, and substance misuse. The reasons given include lack of time, financial pressure, gift-giving, and family gatherings. To make matters worse, the National Alliance on Mental Illness noted that 64% of individuals living with a mental illness felt that their conditions worsened around the holidays. However, there are ways in which individuals can prepare themselves and hopefully deflect some of the increased stress of the holidays. It's important to realize that people have more control over their feelings and emotions than they think they do. Cognitive coping statements and positive self-talk can go a long way in supporting oneself through a challenging time, such as the holidays. People can internalize what they repeatedly hear, so if someone fills their day with positive self-affirming statements, they will eventually internalize them.

Practicing both mindfulness and distracting skills may help individuals keep balanced and focused in situations where they may otherwise feel anxious and sad. Feelings of guilt about not seeing family can be replaced with the reasons not to or to stay put. Making it a point to address the physical aspects of anger prior to acting upon them can eliminate feelings of contentiousness or hurt relationships. Finding ways to reach out to others and form relationships can help prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness. For individuals and families coping with mental health challenges, the holiday season can be a lonely or stressful time, filled with anxiety and/or depression. High expectations, loneliness and stress can lead to being overwhelmed. Knowing how to recognize the signs of stress and cope with those feelings in a healthy manner is one of the best gifts a person can give to themselves and others this holiday season. For most people, the holidays bring forth a generous mix of emotions. Armed with a general understanding of emotions, a willingness to work with them, and the courage to try something new, people can cope with their negative holiday emotions in a healthy way.

6 Signs that Indicate Someone is Struggling Around the Holidays

1. Lacking the “Holiday Spirit”
2. Being Overwhelmed by Grief and Loss
3. Feeling Pressured to Participate in Activities—and Want No Part of Them
4. Stressed About Giving Gifts
5. Lack of Sunlight Affecting Mood or Seasonal Affecting Disorder (SAD)
6. Feeling Alone or Isolated

While there's no guaranteed way to make the holidays less stressful, there are some ways people can take care of themselves to take a step back from the hustle and bustle of the holiday season. Self-care should be an important part of anyone's routine no matter the season, but especially during times of high stress (like the holidays). Day-to-day responsibilities such as caring for children or aging parents, working to provide for the family, etc. also don't stop during the holiday season. Adding on shopping for gifts, planning holiday get-togethers, and hosting family that's in town, all while feeling pressure to please and keep everyone jovial and satisfied can increase stress for many people. Unlike many other types of negative stress encountered in life, it's easy know when holiday stress will begin and end, and plans can be made to reduce the amount of stress experienced and the negative impact it has on an individual.

There are ways to combat the negative holiday emotions someone may feel around this time of year. Techniques such as identifying what you are experiencing, pausing to breathe and stay calm, naming the core emotions someone is feeling in that moment, listening (without judgement) to what a person's emotions are telling them, thinking through how to move forward are just a few. Instead of suppressing core emotions, like anger and sadness, which when invalidated worsen anxiety and depression, identifying these emotions can help individuals stay connected to themselves.

Most approach the holidays with mixed feelings of expectation and concern, even worry. For many, the holidays bring the holiday blues or just plain stress. Stress comes from unrealistic expectations, having too many gifts to buy in too short a time, crowded stores, family conflicts, financial worries, fears, or sadness about being alone. Even the weather—rainy, cloudy, cold days that turn dark too early—can literally put a damper on life. There will always be factors that are beyond control, but someone doesn't have to become a victim of the season. With some shift in thinking and attitude, it's possible to let go of the blues and overcome stress. Anyone can turn this time of year into a more pleasant and happy occasion.

Seven Ways to Cope with Holiday Stress

- **Practice Mindfulness & Meditation**

Mindfulness practices can be particularly helpful when traveling or dealing with an unusual schedule.

- **Preventing Burnout**

For many, the holiday season brings joy, but it can also bring more stress and some conflicting obligations. It is important to prioritize and simplify. Prioritize what brings joy and emotional recharge (people or activities) and simplify when possible.

- **Take a break - It's Ok to Say No**

Many families have that one member who can turn a pleasant conversation into a family feud. There is no shame in getting up to leave the room or step outside until everyone cools down.

- **Get Some Fresh Air and Sunlight**

Many people struggle with some feelings of depression during the winter months with fewer hours of sunlight and more time spent indoors. Walking outside in the sun can be an effective centering and calming tool.

- **If in Therapy, Stay in Therapy**

The holidays can bring up difficult emotions. Keeping scheduled therapy sessions helps ensure there is built-in time to explore anything that comes up.

- **Grief and Loss**

During the holiday season, people may have a difficult time missing a loved one or simply experiencing increased grief or loss. Instead of trying to avoid thinking about a loved one, honor and celebrate them by getting together with other family members and friends and treasuring their life stories.

- **Financial stress**

Holiday spending can easily leave people in debt, contributing to stress that may last well into the new year. Avoid overspending and focus on celebrating together and being present. Instead of expensive gifts, consider homemade or handmade items, that may carry special meaning to those receiving them.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association
NAMI

Long Island Press
Mass General Brigham McLean

Psychology Today

Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities

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