



Keep the holidays from becoming a season of stress

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By Nikki Migas



It's promoted as the season of joy and appeals to all of our senses: We see sparkling lights, breathe in the aromas of savory foods, watch friends and families happily gathered around fireplaces or dining room tables, listen to songs extolling wonder and peace, and, of course, fend off a barrage of messages telling us that our loved ones will enjoy an even merrier season if we buy them expensive gifts.

With so many stimuli competing for our attention, the feeling of losing control is a natural reaction. How can we keep the holidays from becoming a season of stress?

Stress is the body's response to any perceived threat or danger. Our reactions to stress are learned responses. In many cases, we react to stressful situations by indulging in quick, pleasurable activities, such as reaching for chocolate. Weaning yourself from unhealthy habits can be relearned in steps, such as eating a "fun size" candy bar instead a full box of chocolates.

Stress is not an imagined response. In fact, it is estimated that 75 percent of physician visits are stress-related, and the World Health Organization predicts that stress will be the number one cause of illness by 2020.

"During the holiday season, people might have too much to do or too little to do," says Joe Kimmel, executive director of the CARF-accredited [Southern Hills Counseling Center](#) in Jasper, Indiana. "Either can be stressors. Older persons are especially susceptible to stress during the holidays because they might be dealing with financial or health issues or perhaps the death of a loved one."

Lawrence P. Meisel, Jr., Ed.D., founder of [Columbus Counseling Services](#) in Columbus, Georgia, also believes in keeping expectations for the holidays reasonable and realistic. "Let go of the idea that you have to measure up to artificial and arbitrary standards set by others," he advises.

Building "emotional agility" combats symptoms of stress

Rose K. Gantner, Ed.D., senior director of health promotion, product development and

innovation at [UPMC Health Plan](#), says the goal of stress reduction is to increase your emotional agility. You can accomplish this by taking deliberate steps to first identify and then relearn your reactions to life's many stressors.

The journey toward personal health and emotional well-being begins with identifying the three types of stress:

- Situational: a response to an expected or unexpected experience, such as sharing the holidays with your newly blended family,
- Acute: a short-term response to an immediate situation, such as a car accident or doctor's visit, or
- Chronic: a long-term response to a situation, such as a death of a loved one, job loss, or divorce.

Enhancing our agility in these situations requires us to understand our own symptoms, so we can begin to focus on new behaviors to alleviate some of our more negative reactions.

Symptoms of stress can affect your entire body

Gantner says symptoms of stress can be grouped into four categories:

- Physical: migraine headaches, loss of appetite, indigestion, muscle tension, a racing heart, or sweaty palms.
- Psychological: forgetfulness, lack of concentration, difficulty with decision making, and being overly critical or negative.
- Emotional: quick irritability or excessive sensitivity; feelings of helplessness, loneliness, or isolation; and sudden outbursts, such as crying or yelling in public.
- Behavioral: smoking, nail biting, over- or under-eating, sleeping too much or too little, and abusing alcohol or drugs.

Although no magic pill can eliminate stress in your life, you can use this list of symptoms as an early warning system to help you learn coping techniques.

Learn interventions to help you cope with stressors

Let's look at some common holiday stressors and simple interventions you can adopt to relieve tension. These coping activities were compiled from recommendations by Gantner, Kimmel, and Meisel.

Excessive holiday food consumption:

- Don't deny something you want; instead, focus on portion control.
- At social events, sample only dishes you don't normally eat.
- Use a smaller plate and divide your servings into one-half vegetables, one-quarter protein, and one-quarter nuts or whole grains.
- Move more and eat less.

Overstimulation from increased activities:

- Examine how your time is being spent and learn to say no.
- Make a “to do” list to help you arrange your priorities. Be sure to put self-care near the top of the list.
- Question if there is a simpler or less expensive way to enjoy spending time with others.
- Plan ahead to avoid excessive diversions.
- Don’t abandon your healthy habits. Get plenty of rest and exercise.
- Engage “actionable” practices to regain control, such as deep breathing or visualization exercises; the concept of “stop, pause, think, and act” can be useful.

Unrealistic family expectations:

- Focus on the quality, not the quantity, of time spent together.
- Consider asking for help from others; for example, when preparing food for large numbers of guests.
- Downplay the “you should, must, ought, and got to” messages from others.
- Growth of families often requires changing traditions. Setting new holiday traditions might help alleviate the stress of new family members or living arrangements.
- If some members of the family don’t get along well with others, set boundaries at family gatherings, such as not serving alcohol or not discussing politics, to reduce the opportunities for tension.
- Have a spending limit and stick to it. If financial issues are a point of stress, be creative with your gift-giving. Simple gifts, like a bar of scented soap or a sea shell, or homemade gifts, such as a jar of jelly, show you care without costing a lot.

Isolation at the holidays:

- Find ways to give of yourself by helping others. Volunteering in a kitchen that serves holiday meals to homeless people can raise your spirits by focusing your attention on the satisfaction of giving and receiving help.
- Focus on qualities of love, kindness, forgiveness, and gratitude.
- Find ways to stay connected to people and nature.
- Dwell on thoughts about what is right in the world.
- A spiritual outlook can yield many benefits—how will your life make the world a better place?
- Writing personal notes to friends and family members can be meaningful for both the writer and the recipient.

Unemployment:

- Consider more personal options that give of yourself during the holidays. Areas of giving to consider include your “time, talent, and treasures.”

- Focus on tools to boost positive thinking, such as [Dr. Barbara Frederickson's positivity ratio](#).
- If stuck on a certain issue, try resetting yourself with a quick diversion, such as looking at an art book or playing with a Slinky® at your desk.

Although you cannot eliminate stressors, a support system can help you balance your life

When you're experiencing any of the above scenarios, being aware of what's triggering the stress can be a tremendous aid to you, in addition to your building a support system to help you reduce the tension in your life.

Kimmel believes discussing your stress with a friend or loved one can help you cope with stressors. He advises, "You might also turn to a religious leader for guidance or to a professional counselor."

Meisel also suggests seeking other sources of support. "Learn about offerings at community centers and places of worship," he says. "Many have support groups, workshops, services, and other activities designed to help people deal with the holiday blues."

"Confiding in someone you trust can help you develop and nurture a support network to reinforce behavior modification," says Neal Kaufman, M.D., co-founder of the [UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families & Communities](#), professor of pediatrics and public health at the [UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine](#), and founder and CEO of [DPS Health](#) in Los Angeles. Kaufman calls connections to other persons "the wonder drug of the 21st century. Building a support system might be the single most important step you take to ensure long-term reduction of stress."

The support network you build can help you attain goals that help you feel better, especially when it comes to maintaining your health. "Many findings correlate physical activity with stress reduction," Kaufman says. "The chemicals produced in your brain from an increased heart rate and enhanced breathing can be calming and improve your mental health.

"In addition to stress reduction, a support network that includes a trusted clinician can be a great motivational tool in a weight management program," adds Kaufman, who led a team that introduced an online program to prevent or slow the progression of type II diabetes in overweight and sedentary adults. Clinicians are able to enhance their patients' health outcomes by using the Internet to provide increased delivery points of support for their patients.

According to Kaufman, the three most important actions you can take to reduce stress are increasing your physical activity, developing and nurturing a social support system, and reaching out with a suggestion or referral to support someone who cannot overcome their personal stress issues.

The results you experience from engaging in these balancing activities may be some of the best gifts you receive this year. “Finding balance in your life is much like learning to play a musical instrument,” concludes Gantner. “With sufficient practice, you can get very good at it.”

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