

Understanding Stress

Stress is the physical and emotional tension that arises when a person is feeling too much pressure from the outside environment. People battle with stress on a daily basis, whether it's involving an unexpected occurrence that needs to be resolved immediately or trying to clarify a miscommunication that occurred. Stress is simply unavoidable.

One of the main times people tend to experience increased stress is during the holidays. Holidays are a time of enjoyment and celebration, but they also bring the added demands of shopping, decorating, baking, and planning for a perfect holiday season. This often results in excessive stress due to the additional list of "Things-to-Do," aside from your day-to-day schedules.

While a small amount of stress can keep your mind alert and active, an overwhelming amount of stress can cause serious psychological and physical damage to your body and health. Being able to take charge and take control of life is essential to managing a low stress level.



Causes of Stress

To manage stress during the holiday season, you must recognize and identify your stressors. Aside from the activities and tasks required to prepare for holiday festivities, there are several other causes of stress that may need to be addressed:

- *Workload Demands*
- *Finances*
- *Personal relationships-family, friends, co-workers*
- *Lack of social support*
- *Unresolved issues/ Inner conflicts*
- *Lack of coping method(s)*
- *Poor health*

Symptoms of Stress Overload

There are several stress indicators of which you should be aware. They include but are not limited to:

- *Difficulty falling asleep*
- *Upset stomach or stomach pain*
- *Difficulty concentrating/focusing*
- *Muscle tension*
- *Feeling depressed*
- *Lack of energy*
- *Headaches*
- *Relationship problems*
- *Change in appetite resulting in weight gain/loss*
- *Feeling frustrated; easily annoyed*
- *Rapid heartbeat*
- *Feeling of fatigue/exhaustion*
- *Increased susceptibility to colds/minor infections*

Coping with Stress

With some practical tips, you can reduce the stress that often comes with the holidays and ensure a well-balanced life.

1. **Don't Over-Commit.** Keep an eye out for over-committing and over-spending. Stick to a budget based on how much you can afford to spend when gift and food shopping. Learn to say no – friends and family will understand if you can't participate in every activity.
2. **Effective Time Management.** It's hard to remain calm and focused if you're running behind on time. Plan ahead and remain organized so you can manage your tasks at your own pace.
3. **Think Optimistically.** Take a moment to reflect and think about things that matter most to you in life. Think about those things which you truly appreciate.
4. **Set time for Relaxation.** Take a bath, read, or go for a walk. Participate in an activity you enjoy and make time to just RELAX. Setting aside 20 minutes a day for relaxing can make all the difference to your stress level. This brief escape can help you recharge and make for a more pleasant season.
5. **Get enough Sleep.** A recommended 6-8 hours of sleep is highly suggested by healthcare professionals. Therefore, start out your day with a good night's rest especially during the holiday season.
6. **Adapt a Healthy Lifestyle.** Staying physically active can help relieve physical and mental tension caused by stress. Encourage the family to eat properly and stay active for that extra boost of energy to meet the demands of the holidays.

Holiday Health: Stress Management

7. Don't Overindulge. During the holidays it's easy to overindulge in what you eat and drink, but overindulging can reduce your energy level. Exercise healthy eating options or enjoy smaller portions of desserts and holiday treats. Watch the alcohol – it's one of the biggest contributors to weight gain over the holidays. Alcohol affects your sleep and can leave you exhausted the next day.
8. Stretch your Muscles. Stretching can help ease the tension of stress. Identify which muscles get tensed up when you're feeling stress and gently massage those target muscle areas.
9. Don't Stress Over what's Uncontrollable. You can't control how other people behave. Don't stress over it, but instead concentrate on how you can react to the problem in a positive manner. Sometimes stepping away from a stressful situation to clear your mind allows time for you to recover from the stress response. Set aside differences and try to accept friends and family members as they are.
10. Talk to Someone. Speak with a close friend or relative. Sometimes just sharing your feelings with someone can be the perfect relief to the pressures of stress. Seek professional help, if you feel persistently sad or anxious.



For more information on stress management, please visit the DoD Wellness website at www.cpms.osd.mil/wellness

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