

Coping with the super-stress season

The period between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day is one of the most stress prone times of the year. Between the holidays, shopping, increased spending, family dynamics, traveling and too much partying, it's the psychological perfect storm. Emotions are in high gear; nerves and tempers can fray easily.

In an American Psychological Association survey on the holidays and stress, people strongly associated positive emotions like happiness and love with the holidays, while at the same time pointing to high levels of fatigue, stress and irritability. People feel pressure to make the holidays the best they can for their families.

Time and money were high on the list of identified stressors. In addition, juggling work-family priorities was a concern. The survey also found that people reported comfort eating, sedentary activities and other unhealthy ways to manage their stress.

It's not a surprise that the holidays engender high stress. It's easy to have overly high expectations with the backdrop of commercialism and advertising painting an unrealistic holiday ideal. People who feel angry, fatigued, lonely or depressed by the crowds, the commercialism and the celebrations often feel out of step and isolated. Plus, for people who have experienced a loss or who have difficult family dynamics, the expectations of happiness can exacerbate problems.



Here are a few tips from experts to help you cope with holiday stress:

Go in with a plan. Set a realistic budget and stick to it. Budget your time, too. Build a social agenda that prioritizes the most important activities, but don't overcommit. You don't have to do everything.

Stick to your routine. Holidays offer many temptations to overindulge in food and drink and ignore sleep and exercise. As much as you can, stick to your normal routines and make healthy choices.

Spend time with the people who mean the most. There's pressure to socialize, but don't overextend your emotional bandwidth. Prioritize time with your loved ones and limit your exposure to toxic people.

Be generous with yourself and with others. Forgive yourself and forgive others. Perform random acts of unexpected kindness for strangers.

Focus on the positive. Be grateful. Don't push for perfection.

Relax. Plan healthy ways to de-stress in advance: Spending time alone, exercising, reading or meditation can help slow the pace.

Have a lifeline. Remember, if things get to be too much during the season, keep the number to your EAP handy. We're available 24-7-365!