

Relieve holiday stress with these tips

The holidays are upon us. Amidst the joy and celebration, office and family parties, traveling and shopping, there can be stress. Everyone is vulnerable. Many life events are difficult to pull off without stress - relationships, parenting, work and life changes. The holiday period can exacerbate such stress and bring on more of its own.

Symptoms

Symptoms can be psychological, physical or both. Irritability, worrying, headaches, poor sleep, gastrointestinal distress and high blood pressure are just a few of the many symptoms of stress. Some people deal with stress better than others and some have learned to identify triggers. Unfortunately, many of us don't deal effectively with the stressors in our lives.

Stress management techniques

In addition to identifying sources of stress, it's important to learn to anticipate times that you'll be finding yourself under stress. Anticipation of an event is the first step toward gaining control. Anticipation needs to be accompanied with an optimistic mindset such as "I know the work of taking care of all the details of the family party on Christmas is going to be stressful, but I know it'll be temporary and I'll manage." In addition to anticipation and acceptance, using common sense regarding diet, exercise and sleep are very important. Moderation is the key. Too much or too little can aggravate stress. Listen to your body and get proper rest.

Controlled breathing

Normally when we breathe we only use the top third of our lungs. By doing abdominal breathing the entire lungs are put into work and more oxygen reaches the brain quickly. Take a few slow, regular breaths and then exhale completely for as long as you can. Your next breath will automatically come from your abdomen. Keep this breathing rhythm going and you may find it quite relaxing, quite quickly. Practice it whenever you can.

Progressive muscle relaxation

You can learn to train your muscles from head to toe to become more deeply relaxed than by just sitting down to take a rest. Pick a quiet place and an uninterrupted 20 minutes and concentrate on tensing your feet and then relaxing them. Then do the same with your lower legs, upper legs, abdomen and lower back, upper torso, neck and head and finally arms and hands. Feel the difference between the tense muscles and relaxed muscles. Combine the controlled breathing technique with the progressive muscle relaxing technique and you can learn to bring your stress level down quite noticeably.

Visualization

Finally after achieving relaxation, spend some time enjoying it and fantasize about a quiet, peaceful, tranquil scene. You might imagine yourself lying on the beach in the warm sun, floating on a raft on a lazy summer day. The more practice, the better you'll get at these stress-reducing techniques. Actually, the level of relaxation that can be achieved is greater than when sleeping. The nervous system is more active during sleep than while in a deep state of relaxation.

Worry control

People who are chronic worriers tend to build up stress without recognizing it, sometimes until symptoms of serious health problems take over. Generalized Anxiety Disorder is a condition for about 4 percent of Americans. For sufferers, worry goes beyond a normal degree and stress reactions take their toll physically and mentally. A tip on preventing yourself from falling into this category is setting up a half hour worry period. This may sound silly, but can help contain worrying each day. Develop a "what if this happens" list and counter it with another list of "so what, if this happens, then I'll do that, the worst rarely happens anyway." It may be difficult, but it's important to try and focus on the present. Try to be mindful of the present predicament only and not dwell on what went wrong in

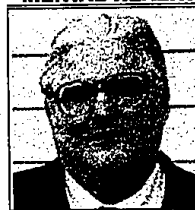
the past or what is dreaded in the future. The holidays bring out the best and sometimes worst in people. Being mindful of proneness to stress, identifying triggers, practicing stress management techniques and taking care of yourself can all be beneficial. When confronted by demands of a lot of other people pressing their needs on you, remind yourself that no other than you can care for your

own personal needs to manage, reduce and hopefully avoid stress during the holidays. For conditions that aren't too bad, ask your librarian or local bookstore for one of the self-help books on stress management. There are several available. For more chronic problems, talk to your family doctor or consult a local mental health facility. Contact the Anxiety Disorders Association of American at

www.adaa.org for a referral to a professional in your area.

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MENTAL HEALTH



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2001 Christmas Tree Guide

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