



# HEALTH

## When the holidays don't feel so happy

I haven't seen a Hallmark card yet that tells the whole story about the holiday season. So allow me to say what everyone is thinking.

The holiday season is stressful. If you are fortunate enough to have a break from work for the holidays, you will probably spend a good portion of your time planning, shopping, cooking, shopping some more, baking, putting up decorations, wrapping gifts, getting the house ready for guests, some more last-minute shopping, and entertaining family and friends.

And as we all know, time with relatives can be good, but it doesn't always feel good. Unfinished business between family members tends to surface in times of stress, and the holiday season provides us with ample time and opportunity for these unresolved issues to surface.

When the guests leave, the remainder of your vacation is spent taking down decorations, cleaning, and gearing up for the New Year — just in time to go back to work. Then, a few weeks later you get the huge credit card bill in the mail.

Whew! It hasn't even happened yet and I am stressed. I can see why Hallmark goes a different direction with their greeting cards.

In a recent survey, the American Psychological Association found that women report more stress than men during the holidays. During the holidays women are less likely to take time to relax or manage their stress in healthy ways. This might be explained by the intensified focus on food and family during the holidays. The pressure to put together a perfect holiday experience for children, spouse, and family puts a burden on women in more traditional family roles— especially woman who are burning the candle at both ends by also acting as bread winners.

Often, both men and women rely on unhealthy ways of coping with stress. In times of stress we have a tendency to drink more alcohol, smoke more cigarettes, over-eat, eat junk food, skip meals, or pick fights with loved ones. Our physical health suffers. Our emotional well-being suffers. Our relationships suffer. Finding healthy ways to manage stress is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle and a happier holiday season.

The APA recommends the following tactics for dealing with holiday stress:

1) Define holiday stress: People experience stress differently.

How do you experience stress? Do you notice stress by changes in your body (e.g., a stiff neck, headaches), thoughts (e.g., constant worrying, negative thoughts about yourself or others), or behaviors (e.g., trouble sleeping, short temper)? Does that experience change during the holidays?

2) Identify holiday stressors: What holiday events or situations are most stressful for you?

Are they related to work, home, relationships or something else? What about these events, situations, or relationships are stressful?

3) Recognize how you deal with stress: Make a list of the things you do or don't do to manage stress. Determine if you are relying on unhealthy behaviors like smoking, drinking or eating to manage stress. Is this a behavior you rely on year-round, or is it specific to holiday stress?

4) Change one behavior at a time: Unhealthy behaviors develop over time and become habits. Replacing unhealthy habits with

### YOU'RE NOT ALONE



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healthy ones requires time, effort, and commitment. Start small and focus on changing one behavior. Your success will help inspire you to make additional changes.

5) Take care of yourself: Taking care of yourself during the holiday season helps you keep your mind and body ready to deal with stress.

If you are worried

about pleasing everyone else, it is easy to lose focus on your own needs and feelings. Take time to engage in holiday activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Don't take a break from regular exercise. Eat healthy. Make sure you get enough sleep.

6) Ask for support: Accepting help from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens your ability to deal with stress. Use the holidays to reconnect with friends and family and strengthen your support network. If you feel overwhelmed by stress, consider seeking professional help from someone trained to understand the connection between the mind and

body. A professional mental health provider can offer strategies to help you manage stress, change unhealthy behaviors, and address emotional issues.

I am not sure who to blame for giving birth to the misconception that we are only supposed to have good feelings during the holiday season. (I can't put all the blame on the greeting card writers). In addition to increased stress, please know that it is okay to have feelings of loneliness, sadness, and grief during the holidays. In fact, it is normal to have these feelings heightened during the holiday season as we take time to reflect on our lives, past, present, and future. If these feelings arise for you, take time to honor your feelings in whatever way feels right ... writing, sharing with a friend, or expressing them in another helpful way.

Amidst the hustle and bustle, don't put too much pressure on yourself this holiday season. You are enough and you have done enough. Take time to breathe deeply, ask for help, and give yourself the precious gift of spending quiet time reflecting on all your blessings.

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