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BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

# Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

November 2012

## When the Holidays Give You the Blues Coping with Seasonal Stress

**The holiday season can be a time of joy, spirituality and family togetherness, but it can also be hectic and stressful.**

Most children wait eagerly for the holidays to arrive. Adults often have more mixed feelings. For them, the holidays mean increased stress:

dashing to decorate the house, elbowing through crowds at the mall, and fretting about the right gift or how to pay for it.

In an online poll conducted in 2011 by the American Psychological Association (APA), nearly three-quarters of Americans say they experience stress at levels that exceed what they define as healthy.<sup>1</sup> The holidays can magnify

that – with the anxiety about buying gifts, attending parties, decorating the house and visiting with family.

You're not alone if you feel stressed during the holidays. In fact, a poll by the APA showed that more than eight out of 10 Americans anticipate stress during the holiday season.<sup>2</sup>

"It is normal to feel overwhelmed during the holiday season. The pressure to have the perfect holiday can be extraordinary," says Dr. Katherine Nordal, executive director for professional practice at APA. "It is important to put things in perspective and realize that the materialism of the holidays isn't the real spirit of the season. The holidays are about family and togetherness, not tinsel and presents."<sup>1</sup>

In the flurry of the holidays, we sometimes forget what we're celebrating. Remember to stop and savor this special time with people you love. Just knowing ahead of time that you might feel stressed can help you in planning to take steps to control the holiday blues.

Coping with holiday stress isn't always easy. But you don't have to go it alone. We're here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges.

## Watch for Signs of Holiday Stress

Everyone reacts to stress differently. Here are some of the most common signs of holiday stress.<sup>3</sup>

- Headaches, muscle tension, neck or back pain
- Upset stomach
- Dry mouth
- Chest pains, rapid heartbeat
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite or overeating comfort food
- Increased number of colds
- Lack of concentration or focus
- Memory problems or forgetfulness
- Jitters
- Irritability
- Short temper
- Anxiety

It's also important to watch for stress that lasts past the holidays. There's a difference between the holiday blues and more serious conditions such as depression, seasonal affective disorder and anxiety disorders.<sup>4</sup> If you or a loved one can't shake the blues once the holidays are over, it may be a more serious condition.

# SEAP

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[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)  
access code: Pennsylvania

# Eight Ways to Help Beat the Holiday Blues

Relax. Don't let stress suck the joy out of your holiday season. These tips can help you keep stress under control so your holidays can be merry and bright.

## 1. Create a game plan.

Spend a little time up front getting organized. Make a list of what you need to buy. Try to shop ahead of time, before things are picked over and you're under pressure. If you'll be cooking, plan your menu. Think whether some items could be prepared ahead and frozen or refrigerated.

## 2. Make a budget and stick to it.

Money is one of the major stressors during the holidays. Don't dig yourself into a hole by overspending. A thoughtful gift doesn't have to be expensive. If money is tight, suggest a family gift exchange with a spending limit.

## 3. Accept reality.

Guests may arrive late. Your mother may get on your nerves. The turkey may be dry. Real life isn't a holiday special. Don't expect perfect decorations, a perfect meal or perfect people. Try to go with the flow and enjoy what you have.

## 4. Beware of unhealthy stress relievers.

Holiday stress causes some people to fall into bad habits such as smoking, drinking or eating too much. Think about any unhealthy habits you're prone to and better ways to handle stress.

## 5. Create new traditions.

Stressed out by the usual festivities? Try something different. Instead of cooking a huge meal on your own, make it a potluck. Ask adults to bring gag gifts or have a "white elephant" or used book gift exchange. Attend a local holiday concert, walk the neighborhood to look at holiday lights or go sledding.

## 6. Make time for your health.

In the holiday rush, don't let your wellbeing fall by the wayside. Try to stay on your normal sleep schedule and get regular exercise. If you can't find a 30-minute chunk of time for exercise, break it up into three 10-minute sessions spread through the day.



## 7. Watch out for caffeine and alcohol.

Caffeine can raise your stress and interfere with sleep. Alcoholic drinks contain lots of calories, and drinking too much may make you feel depressed. Instead, drink plenty of water or try herb tea or seltzer.

## 8. Give yourself a break.

In the midst of doing things for others, it's easy to forget to take care of ourselves. If you feel stress building up, get away for a few minutes. Find a quiet corner and do some deep breathing, listen to calming music or just sit. Or throw on a coat and slip outside for a walk.

## Resources

United Behavioral Health  
[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)

Visit the Coping with Stress Life Stages Center.

Search for these articles and more: "The Holiday Blues," "'Tis the Season for Holiday Memories and... Holiday Stress," "Simplify the Season."

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1 Making the Most of the Holiday Season. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/holiday-season.aspx>. Accessed December 4, 2011.  
2 Tips for Parents on Managing Holiday Stress. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/parents-holiday.aspx>. Accessed December 4, 2011.  
3 Listening to the Warning Signs of Stress. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-signs.aspx>. Accessed December 4, 2011.  
4 Holiday Blues that Linger could be Warning Sign of Depression. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2009/12/holiday-blues.aspx>. Accessed December 4, 2011.