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Holiday Stress Management: Finding Joy Amidst the Stress

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The holiday season, painted with joy, family bonding, and festive activities, can paradoxically become a hotbed of stress. While the sparkle of the holidays remains alive in our hearts, the responsibility of managing preparations, finances, and familial expectations can turn the season into a pressure cooker. Likely most of us have experienced what I refer to as the Baskin Robbin ice cream maker stress where you searched every toy store in town and surrounding areas for the one gift your 4-year-old had to have on Christmas morning. For Arnold and Sinbad, it was Turbo Man. The internet of things has certainly reduced some of that stress, but the struggle was real. But why does a season, once eagerly anticipated in childhood, morph into a stressful juggernaut in adulthood?

Research from the American Psychological Association (APA) reveals that a significant number of Americans experience increased stress during the holidays. A myriad of factors, from financial constraints to societal expectations, contribute to this uptick in stress.

According to the APA, major stressors include:

- Lack of time
- Lack of money
- Commercial pressures
- Gifting expectations
- Dietary temptations

Decoding the Stress: The Numbers Behind the Season

- A staggering 88% of Americans reported feeling stressed during the holiday celebrations in 2018.

- Women, on average, feel more holiday stress than men, primarily due to taking on most holiday planning and shopping.
- Surprisingly, individuals under 30 years old are less likely to report increased stress during the holidays.
- Financial concerns dominate holiday stress, with 50% of 2020 survey respondents worried about affording gifts.
- Lower-middle-income groups tend to feel more stress, juggling work, shopping, and monetary constraints.
- Americans commonly resort to sedentary behaviors like indulging in comfort foods or watching TV to deal with this stress.

Recognizing the Telltale Signs of Stress

Emotional Signs of Stress

- Irritable, angry, impatient or wound up
- Over-burdened or overwhelmed
- Anxious, nervous or afraid
- Unable to enjoy yourself
- Depressed
- Uninterested in life
- A sense of dread
- Worried or tense
- Neglected or lonely
- Existing mental health problems getting worse

Physical Signs of Stress Include:

- Difficulty breathing
- Panic attacks
- Blurred eyesight or sore eyes
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches and headaches
- Chest pains and high blood pressure
- Indigestion or heartburn
- Feeling sick, dizzy or fainting
- Sudden weight gain or weight loss
- Developing rashes or itchy skin
- Sweating
- Existing physical health problems getting worse

Four Strategies for Holiday Stress Management

1. Acknowledge Your Struggles: Identify your personal stress triggers and strategize ways to navigate them
2. Cultivate Gratitude: Daily gratitude practices can uplift your spirits and enhance overall well-being
3. Express Yourself: Use journaling as an outlet to understand and process your emotions

4. Prioritize Rest: Ensure adequate sleep to maintain a healthy immune system, sharp memory, and overall well-being

Practical Tips to Combat Holiday Overwhelm

1. Plan in Advance: Organize your commitments and prepare ahead
2. Learn to Decline: You can't attend every event. Delegate tasks when necessary
3. Budget Wisely: Set a spending limit to avoid post-holiday financial strain
4. Foster a Relaxing Atmosphere: Utilize music, scents, and sunlight to create a calming environment
5. Stay Active and Eat Right: Engage in physical activities and opt for healthier food choices
6. Communicate: Discuss your feelings, especially if you're coping with a recent loss
7. Accept Differences: Embrace diverse viewpoints within the family and focus on commonalities
8. Set Realistic Expectations: Strive for joy over perfection
9. Take Personal Breaks: Ensure you have moments of self-care and relaxation.

In essence, the holidays are about cherishing moments with loved ones. Recognizing the roots of our stress and adopting strategies for stress management can help ensure we fully savor the season's magic. Awareness, after all, is the first step toward ensuring stress doesn't eclipse our holiday cheer. And remember, in the years to come you will sit around the dinner table with your grown kids telling silly stories about the Baskin Robbin ice cream maker moments.



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