

Finding Balance During the Holiday Season: Managing Stress and Embracing Joy

The holiday season is often called “the most wonderful time of the year,” but for many, it can bring increased stress and anxiety. A 2023 survey by the American Psychological Association found that 89% of U.S. adults feel stressed during the holiday season, with 41% reporting higher stress levels compared to other times of the year. This stress can lead to physical illness, depression, anxiety, and substance misuse. Fortunately, managing holiday stress is possible by prioritizing self-care and making mindful choices.

One of the most important steps to maintaining balance during this busy time is getting enough rest. A consistent sleep schedule and early bedtimes help you stay rested and energized. Moderation is also key when it comes to food and alcohol. Practicing mindful eating and drinking can prevent overindulgence and its associated stress of the guilt for consuming too much.

Regular physical activity, even a short walk, can help improve mood and energy levels. Spending time outdoors is another great way to relieve stress—fresh air and natural surroundings provide a refreshing break from the season’s hectic pace. Bundle up and head outdoors, even if it’s just for a short time!

Carving out time for activities you enjoy, such as reading or enjoying a massage, is crucial for emotional well-being. Connecting with others and nurturing meaningful relationships also provides vital support and joy throughout the season. Invite your neighbor or a friend over for coffee or join forces with friends and spend an afternoon baking holiday treats.

To shift your focus away from holiday stress, consider keeping a gratitude journal or starting a gratitude jar. These practices help highlight positive moments and foster an optimistic outlook. Additionally, practicing mindfulness, such as deep breathing exercises or meditation, can help calm anxiety and keep you centered.

Setting realistic expectations is essential to avoiding burnout. Striving for perfection can be exhausting, so it’s important to recognize your limits and not overcommit. It’s also normal to feel a mix of emotions during the holidays—acknowledge those feelings and take time to celebrate small successes, whether completing a task or simply making it through the day.

When the pressures of the season become overwhelming, taking a break from news and social media can offer much-needed relief. Sticking to a daily routine provides structure, but it’s important to leave time for rest. If the stress becomes too much to manage, don’t hesitate to seek professional help, such as therapy or counseling.

Respecting others’ boundaries is essential—avoid pressuring anyone to participate in activities they’re uncomfortable with. Instead, suggest low-key, relaxing activities that might bring them

comfort. Offering practical assistance, such as helping with shopping or decorating, can also alleviate their stress.

For those grieving or going through difficult times, regular check-ins are especially important. Sometimes, just offering a listening ear can be comforting. If someone is struggling significantly, gently suggesting professional help can be a critical step in their healing process. Learning to recognize and respond to mental health challenges can also be a powerful way to support loved ones.

The holidays aren't just about self-care; they're also a time to support others. Many people struggle with feelings of isolation or stress during this time, and offering a simple check-in can make a big difference. Reaching out to family or friends who may be feeling alone helps them feel seen and supported. Active listening, without judgment, allows you to understand their needs and offer comfort.

Brianne McClellan, the East Central Regional Suicide Prevention Coordinator shared her insights, stating, "The holidays can bring joy and connection, but they can also introduce additional stress from financial pressures, social obligations, and high expectations. Helping yourself and others cope during this time is crucial for maintaining emotional well-being and fostering a positive environment." By focusing on self-care and offering support to others, the holiday season can become a time of connection and joy instead of stress. Embrace the season's true spirit by caring for yourself and others, creating an atmosphere of balance and positive energy.

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