

Coping with Holiday Stress – Dr. Charles P. Catania, MD

Welcome to the holiday season - that whirlwind of gift-giving holidays, marketing blitzes, holiday parties, and activities galore that begins right after Halloween, builds to Thanksgiving, and continues gaining momentum through the end of the year.

While this season is meant to bring feelings of love and cheer, it's also the harbinger of holiday stress for many. In fact, according to a poll conducted on verywellmind.com, more than 80% of us find the holiday season to be 'somewhat' or 'very' stressful - that ranks navigating the holidays right up there with asking for a raise!

What Is Holiday Stress? The extra expenses. Angry in-laws. Long hours at the office. Exhausted and sugared-up kids. Cold weather and seasonal darkness. Final exams, sporting events and recitals. Absent romantic partners. Profound loneliness . . . Individually, we can handle each of these stressors as they come. But during the holidays, everything hits at once. Throw in a midterm election season and Aunt Suzie's surprise visit, and our fight-or-flight stress response systems are ringing off the hook.

In most cases, stress is normal and good. It's when it becomes overwhelming, heavy, and all-at-once that we lose perspective. When we experience stress, our muscles tighten, our heart rates spike, and our bodies flood with hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline. We scan our surroundings for danger over a platter of steaming turkey and stuffing. We're trying to not die - with Bing Crosby crooning in the background.

Minimizing Holiday Stress - The great thing about holiday stress is that it's predictable. Unlike many other types of negative stress, we encounter in life, we know when holiday stress will begin and end, and we can make plans to reduce the amount of stress we experience and the negative impact it has on us.

Accept your needs. Be kind to yourself! Put your own mental and physical well-being first. Recognize what your triggers are to help you prepare for stressful situations.

Write a gratitude list and offer thanks. As we near the end of the year, it's a good time to reflect on what you are grateful for, then thank those who have supported you.

Manage your time and don't try to do too much. Prioritizing your time and activities can help you use your time well. Making a day-to-day schedule helps ensure you don't feel overwhelmed by everyday tasks and deadlines. It's okay to say no to plans that don't fit into your schedule or make you feel good.

Be realistic. Even pre-pandemic, the happy lives of the people shown in those holiday commercials are fictional. We all have struggles one time or another and it's not realistic to expect otherwise. Sometimes, it's simply not possible to find the perfect gift or have a peaceful time with family.

Set boundaries. Family dynamics can be complex. Acknowledge them and accept that you can only control your role.

Practice relaxation. Deep breathing, meditation and progressive muscle relaxation are good ways to calm yourself. Taking a break to refocus can have benefits beyond the immediate moment.

Exercise daily. Schedule time to walk outside, bike or join a dance class. Whatever you do, make sure it's fun. Daily exercise naturally produces stress-relieving hormones in your body and improves your overall physical health.

Set aside time for yourself and prioritize self-care. Schedule time for activities that make you feel good. It might be reading a book, going to the movies, getting a massage, listening to music you love, or taking your dog for a walk.

Eat well. With dinners, parties, and cookie trays at every turn, our eating habits are challenged during the holiday season. Try to maintain a healthy diet through it all. Eating unprocessed foods, like whole grains, vegetables, and fresh fruit is the foundation for a healthy body and mind. Eating well can also help stabilize your mood.

Get enough sleep. Symptoms of some mental health conditions, like mania in bipolar disorder, can be triggered by getting too little sleep.

Avoid alcohol and drugs. They don't actually reduce stress: in fact, they often worsen it. If you're struggling with substance abuse, educate yourself and get help.

Practice Mindfulness and Meditation. Mindfulness can be a valuable mental wellness tool. Mindfulness practices can be particularly helpful if you are traveling or dealing with an unusual schedule. If you're new to mindfulness, there are many online resources and apps to help you.

Preventing Burnout. It's OK to Say No. For many, the holiday season brings joy, but it can also bring more stress and some conflicting obligations. It is important to prioritize and simplify. Prioritize what brings joy and emotional recharge (people or activities) and simplify when you can. It might be nice to make your grandmother's cookie recipe from scratch for every holiday, but if that's stressful for you, buy cookies at the store and celebrate. It's okay to say no to situations that stress you out, whether it's attending a party with people who have mistreated you or missing a party in a week that's been too intense at work.

Take a break. Many families have that one member who can turn a pleasant conversation into a family feud. If you see things are starting to take a turn for the worse, try not to let it escalate. There is no shame in removing yourself from the situation. Get up and leave the room or step outside until everyone cools down.

If You're in Therapy, Stay in Therapy. Although the holiday season may be overwhelmingly busy, try to keep any regularly scheduled therapy a priority. The holidays can bring up difficult emotions. Keeping scheduled therapy sessions helps ensure you have built-in time to explore anything that comes up. If you are going out of town and you typically meet in person, ask your therapist about a virtual meeting. Managing mental illness is a challenge, and it can be particularly difficult during the holiday season. While the struggle can feel isolating, remember that you are far from alone. Talk with supportive friends and family and seek help from a mental professional if you need to, maintain your self-care routines, and consider including mindfulness practices into your days as you navigate your way through the holidays.

Grief and Loss. During the holiday season, many people may have a more difficult time missing a loved one they have lost or simply experience increased grief or loss. This can be especially true for people having their first holiday season without a loved one. Instead of trying to avoid thinking about your loved one, psychiatrist Ludmila De Faria, M.D., suggests honoring and celebrating them by

getting together with other family members and friends and treasuring their life stories, especially stories that highlight important aspects of their life and personality.

Financial stress. Holiday spending can easily leave people in debt, contributing to stress that may last well into the new year. This year's inflation is only adding to the financial burden. Try to avoid overspending and focus on celebrating together and showing affection by being present, engaging, and supporting each other. Instead of one gift per person, consider a Secret Santa, instead of expensive gifts, consider homemade or handmade items, that may carry special meaning to those receiving them.

Holiday stress is usually short-lived. However, if you're finding it hard to function at home, at work, or in your relationships, reach out to a mental health professional. Therapy, coaching, and counseling can help with managing stress during the holidays.

Holidays are meant to be filled with joy, gratitude, belly laughs and lingering conversations over the dinner table. But connection doesn't happen by accident. Don't get so caught up in the mania that you forget to enjoy the people you're doing all this for.

And do your best to respond well to holiday stress this year. Yeah, the holidays can be crazy - but we can choose to be gracious and generous with ourselves and our loved ones.

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Dr. Catania has been in a private practice setting since 2010 and has been named "Readers' Choice Top Doc" in South Jersey Magazine in August 2013, and "Top Doc" by his peers in Mainline Today Magazine in 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Dr. Catania has an interest in all facets of family medicine. He enjoys spending time and getting to know his patients on a personal level and providing care when they need it most. He loves working our walk-in hours and in our PentaHealth Today clinic on Sundays.

He treasures time with his wife and children, and he takes pride in bringing a very personal and friendly experience when caring for his patients here at PentaHealth.



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