

'Tis the Season to be Stressed!

The month between Thanksgiving and Christmas is often the most stress-filled time of the year. Combine seasonal family commitments, traveling, shopping and cooking with everyday stressors like working and it is no wonder many people become overwhelmed with tension and anxiety.

Stress

The causes of stress are usually events that make people feel angry, helpless, lonely, sad or frustrated. Some people feel stress during their morning commute, during meetings at work and at home with their families. Other people seem to walk through life without a care in the world, even when the circumstances around them are chaotic and pressure-filled. These people either are not affected by stress, or have come up with a way to handle it.

Stress can effectively be dealt with in a number of ways. People can avoid situations where they know they will feel uncomfortable, angry or upset. People can also go into these situations with a different mindset, trying to be more adaptive to circumstances that normally cause them tension.

Signs of Stress

To a certain degree, feeling stressed is a normal, healthy response to the everyday wear and tear of life. The ability to react under stress is crucial for human survival. However, over time the body's continued response to constant stress can lead to physical and emotional problems.

Here are some *physical* signs that a person may be experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress:

- Rapid and shallow breathing
- Sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Tiredness and fatigue
- Backaches and neck pains
- Headaches and migraines
- Trouble sleeping

- Irregular sleep schedule
- Chronic heartburn or ulcers

The *behavioral* symptoms that a person may be experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress include:

- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Being socially withdrawn
- Unable to concentrate
- Forgetfulness
- "Nervous" habits like biting fingernails or grinding teeth
- Abuse of alcohol and drugs

Causes of Holiday Stress

It is easy to see why the holiday season can be stressful; there are many more situations and events that cause people to feel sadness, anger and frustration during this time of the year.

Here is a list of some common causes of holiday stress:

- Shopping. The crowds at the malls and in the stores can make the most kindhearted people hate society.
- Family. Not every family relationship is subject matter for a Norman Rockwell painting. Problems, disagreements and fights happen, often when family members gather for the holidays.
- Hosting. Some people are overwhelmed by the duties involved in hosting holiday parties and events. Relatives and friends who come to town for extended visits can also cause stress.
- Trying to do too much. Many people pack their day planners until there is not 15 minutes of free time available. They are always on the go, never taking time to catch their breath.

- Trying to be perfect. Perfection is a nice goal to strive for, but a more reasonable and attainable goal is to strive for above-average.
- The shorter days. The amount of daylight available around the holidays is minimal. Many people feel they have to fit as many activities as possible into what little daylight there is, creating stress.
- Being alone. Loneliness is a cause of stress for many people, especially those who have lost loved ones or who are away from their families during the holidays.

Ways to Eliminate Holiday Stress

Here are some things many people do to eliminate holiday stress from their lives:

- Shop smartly. Make a shopping list so you only have to go to the mall and other stores one time. Do not overspend, and avoid prolonged searches for "the perfect gift." To avoid stores altogether try buying gifts online.
- Break the routine. Don't be afraid to make a new plan for the holidays this year. If you usually travel every year, try staying at home. Or try dining out for your holiday feast. Start a new tradition and seize the opportunity to make the holidays special in your own way.
- Prioritize your holiday events. You cannot possibly make it to every holiday party and event, so make some decisions about which ones you want to attend. Do not burden yourself with trying to do everything. Only do the things that are important to you.
- Allow others to help. If you are a do-it-yourself kind of person try delegating tasks to other people so you do not crumble under the burden of having too much to do.
- Recognize when stress is negatively affecting you. Be aware of how you are feeling physically and emotionally. Learn to self-diagnose when stressors in life are pushing your buttons and use some relaxation or deep-breathing techniques to alleviate the anxiety.
- Recognize if stress is getting to others. Keep an eye on your family and friends, and volunteer to help or assist anybody who looks frazzled.
- Watch what you eat. Many people overeat around the holidays, and the weight they gain can cause stress. If it's willpower you lack, try holding a glass of water. You'll have to balance the glass on your plate or put it down every time you take a bite. Also, pay attention to how much caffeine and alcohol you are consuming. Caffeine and alcohol use can contribute to stressful feelings because both drugs alter how people act, react and feel physically and emotionally.

- Exercise. Many people relieve the stress in their lives through physical exercise. In the winter it might be harder to go outside for a jog, but there are plenty of things people can do indoors to raise their heart rates and burn energy. Make exercise a priority and build it into your schedule.
- Let bygones be bygones. Try to put personal disagreements with family members aside during the holidays. Acknowledge the problem without going into the past and digging up old wounds. Try request a holiday truce and always steer clear of politics and religion.
- Make time for yourself. Plan a day where you do things you want at your own pace. It will be easier to deal with the chaotic holidays if you occasionally take time to rest, relax and recharge your batteries.
- Don't try to have the perfect holiday season. Trying to be perfect is as fruitless a quest as trying to control the weather. There are too many variables in life for perfection to be a reasonable goal. Accept that there will be problems, errors and unexpected events and accept the season for what it is: a time to enjoy the company of family and friends.
- Seek support. The Counseling, Assistance and Referral Services (CARS) is ready to offer ways to cope with stress. CARS is a free and confidential service, available to all benefits-eligible faculty and staff of UNM. You can call CARS at 272-6868 to schedule an initial appointment.