

Expert Offers Ways to Practice 'Safe Stress' During the Holidays

While many associate the holidays with Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and its theme of gaining and sharing the holiday spirit, E. Christine Moll, PhD, says the opening lines from *A Tale of Two Cities* may have even more relevance: It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the season of light; it was the season of darkness... It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair.

Moll, chair and professor of counseling and human services at Canisius College and a mental health counselor, says that for many the holidays are a time of stress, loneliness, anxiety, and dysfunction. "Suicide rates rise 10% during the season," says Moll. She notes that the following are three areas that can trigger holiday stress or depression:

- **Relationships.** "Relationships can cause turmoil, conflict or stress at any time. But tensions are often heightened during the holidays. Family misunderstandings and conflict can intensify—especially if you're all thrust together for several days. Conflicts are bound to arise with so many needs and interests to accommodate. On the other hand, if you're facing the holidays without a loved one, you may find yourself especially lonely or sad."

- **Finances.** "Like your relationships, your financial situation can cause stress at any time of the year. Overspending during the holidays on gifts, travel, food and entertainment can increase stress as you try to make ends meet while ensuring that everyone on your gift list is happy."

- **Physical demands.** "The strain of shopping, attending social gatherings and preparing holiday meals can wipe you out. Feeling exhausted increases your stress, creating a vicious cycle. Exercise and sleep—good antidotes for stress and fatigue—may take a back seat to chores and errands. High demands, stress, lack of exercise, and overindulgence in food and drink—these are all ingredients for holiday illness."

So what does one do when it's the season to be jolly yet you're feeling anything but?

"When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup," says Moll. "Take steps to help prevent normal holiday depression from progressing into chronic depression." Moll suggests the following tips:

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** "If a loved one has recently died or you aren't near your loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness or grief. It's OK now and then to take time just to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season."

- **Seek support.** "If you feel isolated or down, seek out family members and friends, or community, religious or social services. They can offer support and companionship. Consider volunteering at a community or religious function. Getting involved and helping others can lift your spirits and broaden your social circle. Also, enlist support for organizing holiday gatherings, as well as meal preparation and cleanup. You don't have to go it alone. Don't be a martyr."

- **Be realistic.** "As families change and grow, traditions often change as well. Hold on to those you can and want to. But understand in some cases that may no longer be possible. Perhaps your entire extended family can't gather together at your house. Instead, find new ways to celebrate together from afar, such as sharing pictures, emails or videotapes."

Set differences aside. “Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. With stress and activity levels high, the holidays might not be conducive to making quality time for relationships. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress too.”

Stick to a budget. “Before you go shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend on gifts and other items. Then be sure to stick to your budget. If you don't, you could feel anxious and tense for months afterward as you struggle to pay the bills. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.”

Plan ahead. “Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends, and other activities. Plan your menus and then make one big food-shopping trip. That will help prevent a last-minute scramble to buy forgotten ingredients—and you'll have time to make another pie, if the first one's a flop. Allow extra time for travel so that delays won't worsen your stress.”

Learn to say no. “Believe it or not, people will understand if you can't do certain projects or activities. If you say yes only to what you really want to do, you'll avoid feeling resentful and overwhelmed. If it's really not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.”

Don't abandon healthy habits. “Don't let the holidays become a dietary free-for-all. Some indulgence is OK but overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and schedule time for physical activity.”

Take a breather. “Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Steal away to a quiet place, even if it's the bathroom, for a few moments of solitude. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that clears your mind, slows your breathing and restores your calm.”

Rethink resolutions. “Resolutions can set you up for failure if they're unrealistic. Don't resolve to change your whole life to make up for past excess. Instead, try to return to basic, healthy lifestyle routines. Set smaller, more specific goals with a reasonable time frame. Choose only those resolutions that help you feel valuable and provide more than only fleeting moments of happiness.”

Forget about perfection. “Holiday TV specials are filled with happy endings. But in real life, people don't usually resolve problems within an hour or two. Something always comes up. You may get stuck late at the office and miss your daughter's school play, your sister may dredge up an old argument, you may forget to put nuts in the cake, and your mother may criticize how you and your partner are raising the kids—all in the same day. Expect and accept imperfections.”

Seek professional help if you need it. “Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for several weeks, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. You may have depression.”

Moll says that one key to minimizing holiday stress and depression is the knowledge that the holidays can trigger stress and depression. “Accept that things aren't always going to go as planned,” says Moll. “Then

take active steps to manage stress and depression. You may actually enjoy the holidays this year more than you thought you could. Just remember, for the holidays and beyond, practice safe stress!”

— *Source: Canisius College*