

# Holiday stress: What to expect and how to cope

***Presenter – Amy Hopkins, Clinical Liaison***

Hello everyone. This is Amy Hopkins. I'm a licensed clinical social worker, and I'm happy to be here today to talk to you about holiday stress, what to expect and how to cope.

## Objectives

I will review the sources of holiday stress, discuss how we sometimes cope, define healthy and unhealthy holiday expectations, and identify some positive coping strategies to help you get through the holiday season.

## Some of the sources of holiday stress are:

This captures a lot of the themes that I hear from people about what stresses them out during the holidays. And holiday stress definitely includes social stress. There's so many parties, work functions, family gatherings, and traditions that have to be continued. And on top of that, we have holiday expectations from friends too.

We get invitations to things, and then we have to think about what to wear, what to bring, and all that's required of us. And then what if you're designated to be the host. I know I get hooked into hosting every year, and that in and of itself is a mountain of stress. I got hooked into hosting Thanksgiving again this year, and I'm already dreading it. And money which is always a stressor, now it's around the holidays. It's like your kryptonite, the pressure to buy gifts, decorations, new clothes, or pictures or whatever. It just never seems to end and emotionally, you may be missing someone who you've had a strong connection with, or that they've passed on.

You might be struggling with feelings of grief and loss, and then we just run ourselves ragged. We don't take care of ourselves, because we're too busy saying yes to everything, because what's also really tricky about the holidays and holiday stress is that if you think about the other months of the year, before Halloween and Thanksgiving and all of these other holidays, is that you're probably already stressed out just trying to take care of the everyday needs, right? All of the daily normal stuff, the laundry and the groceries and the work and the family, and the errands. And then here we are in the holidays and we're saying, "Guess what, not only do you have to do all your regular stress, but now we're going to pile

on a whole extra layer of stress for you. Enjoy! And guess what, you're supposed to really have a great time during this time of year, and really just savor up every moment of the holiday season." And for a lot of us, all that we can really feel is the stress. And it's hard because there's less time for things, like relaxation and reflection and thoughtful decision making. And there may be conflict for you between the demands of work and then the holiday excitement at home. There really is only so much of you that can go around, and where are you going to spend your time and your energy.

## **Holiday spirit and holiday stresses**

I want you to take a second here and think about what kind of behaviors you might use during this time of year to help you manage your stress. A lot of us when we get stressed out, we respond or engage in behaviors that might temporarily reduce the stress, but in the end, it creates a lot more stress for us. And then it becomes this vicious cycle. These are self-soothing behaviors and stress responses. These behaviors again lead to more stress. For a lot of us, we turn to food. We engage in emotional eating, and that turns into overeating. This may not even be related to stress, but it might just be that you're going to parties, and there's all of this temptation out there, buffets and treats and candies.

And then you just end up eating too much. I want you to think about is that something that you engage in? Do you tend to fall into the overeating trap? And also a lot of us, we get caught up in gifting and meeting gifting expectations. Getting somebody a really wonderful impressive gift can turn into needing to power shop, or spend too much money. And around the holidays, there is definitely a tendency for people to end up drinking too much. And again, that can be related to just there's a lot of holiday parties. It could be that you're just sitting at home alone, the days are short, the nights are long and you decide to take a few extra adult beverages in.

And it could also be in response to just feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or depressed.

## **Unhealthy holiday expectations:**

Here are some unhealthy holiday expectations. Falling into that trap of feeling like we have to look perfect, we have to act perfect and everything has to fit into this picture of a fantasy holiday. It doesn't have to look like that. We feel like if it doesn't look like that, then we're failing somehow. And then we start to pressure ourselves and others into this idea of the perfect holiday. We want everybody to look perfect and act perfect, and be everything that that picture, that fantasy holiday looks like. And asking anyone in our world or ourselves to act or be anything other than a flawed imperfect human is an unhealthy expectations.

Just because it's November or December, doesn't mean we're instantly going to have everything all worked out. Also, around this time of the year, we may feel like we have to do a lot of things to please others or impress others. And that can turn up in the form of obligations like having to go to that party that maybe you don't really want to go to. And when you get there, you feel like you have to stay for a really long time, and you didn't want to be there in the first place. I mentioned before you already have excessive daily responsibilities, and now we're adding on the extras. So, we want to just be aware that there are only so many hours in a day that you can only do so many things. When you choose to do one thing, you're also choosing to not do something else.

### **Healthy holiday expectations:**

Here are some healthy, reasonable holiday expectations. It's reasonable to think you're going to have some fun with the people you love and enjoy spending time around, that you're going to be able to connect with friends and family and that you should have time for yourself to enjoy it and be able to reflect on the past year and prepare for the new year.

### **Holiday stress self-assessment**

I want you to think about whether or not you're a holiday rat racer. Do you tend to race around trying to get everything done? You may, if you tend to do that anyway, there's probably a pretty good chance that you do it during the holidays. Do you really worry a lot about making everyone happy?

Are you the peacemaker? Because if this is something that applies to you, there are also good chances that you're so preoccupied with making everybody else happy that you tend to neglect yourself, and neglect your own self-care. Do you tend to spend more money than you can really afford? Are the holidays about stuff, about things? And then do you tend to work harder and longer at your job and at home? For a lot of people who are stressed about money, they take on additional jobs during this time, and that can really stretch you very thin. Think about which of these apply to you. If you're aware of them, maybe you can try to address those high risk areas for you.

### **What can you do to beat or reduce holiday stress?**

When it comes to managing holiday stress, we're going to move on now to talk about how to manage it. The reason I wanted to review the stressors and really get you to reflect and explore all of those common areas where many of us experience stress during the holiday season is because again, when you're aware of it, you're able to address it. When we're

unaware, our stress manages us. It's important to recognize what the triggers are for you. What are those areas where you tend to get stressed, especially stressed during this time of year? Because once you recognize that, you can make a plan and you can be more proactive. Once you're more aware, then you can diffuse those stressful situations, so they have less power over you.

And I think if there's anything that you take away from this presentation, it's that a lot of the things that we stress about don't necessarily need to be a big deal, right? You don't have to get somebody the most perfect gift. Let's lighten up on ourselves, lighten up on others. If you don't get the cookies made, it's not the end of the world, everything will still be okay.

## **Stress solutions: money**

Let's come back to this money issue, because it's such a big deal for so many of us. When it comes to managing our stress during this time, one of the best things that you can do is make a budget. Decide how much you can spend on gifts, and who you are going to give gifts to this year.

Maybe you don't have to give a gift to every cousin and every family member, and maybe you can have a reality check about gift giving in general, maybe a little conversation with extended family or friends about not doing gifts. Maybe you decide on a holiday card, or buy your own lunch gathering, something that doesn't require a gift for everyone in your life from A to Z. Then decide how much you're going to spend on each gift and each person, and make sure that you're being reasonable about what can actually fit into your budget. For me and my spouse and kids, we have set up some real parameters. We all get four things; something to wear, something to read, something we want, and something we need.

Those four things cannot exceed the individual budget. If my kids want to spend a \$150 on shoes, they know they're not going to be getting expensive clothes too. It lets them realize that money isn't endless and their wishlists have to be reasonable. Again, those four things; something to wear, something to read, something we want, and something we need, and then we have to stay in the personal budget. The important thing about a budget is that you make it and then you stick to it. A budget is worthless if you're just going to disregard it and/or just start to wing it. So, make sure that you stick to the budget you set.

We're going to talk about this more on the next slide, but avoid ATMs and those spur of the moment withdrawals because a lot of times, you get charged with extra fees. Again speaking about ATMs and cash. If you can pay in cash, pay in cash. I know that's especially challenging in this day and age, where so much of our shopping is online, but Dave Ramsey, the financial guru often cites research that says when we pay for things with physical money, we are more emotionally and mentally aware of how much we're using. We tend to

spend less when using physical money, versus paying with a credit card. If you pay with cash, you'll be much more cognizant of how much everything is costing.

And then again, we have to be clear with family and friends about how we're doing gifts. Maybe you don't give gifts to everybody, or maybe you agree to a money cap. And then you may need to get creative. Some of the best gifts that I've received have been creative and low-cost gifts. Things like photographs or a recipe I really wanted, and maybe you'd give a family gift, instead of individual gifts for everybody or no gifts, but you do an activity together. Remember, it's really easy to get caught up in this idea of stuff and materialism. And remember, that's not what the season is about. It's not about things. Research shows that we are actually happier when we spend money on doing things, rather than physical items.

This is because the memories of being together or doing something special is what really can make us happy now and later. You get that new thing and then the shiny newness rubs off, or a new version comes out and you're done with it. Consider giving gifts of time, or attention to your loved ones. That could be a day out together or a movie night. You can be creative and bake something, or help with chores or projects around their home or again, you can give a nice photo. Just think about this. Can you think of one thing that you got last year for the holiday? I know I can't, but I do remember all the fun we had, the things that we did.

I remember going out to the northern desert as a family with our friends and seeing the wild horses. I got so close to them. My kids thought I was the horse whisperer and still talk about it to this day. I ruined a pair of my favorite boots, but I didn't care. It was magical, it was beautiful. This was a wonderful moment that we all shared. When I think about that, it makes me really happy. So, just remember to focus on what really matters this time of year, because I know for sure, I do not remember one gift that I got last year.

## **Stress solutions: mindful eating**

When it comes to healthy eating, you know nobody's going to be perfect at this time of year, right? And if you're going to stick to a rule, try the 80/20 rule. It's a great way to go.

Eighty percent healthy foods, 20% may be indulging in those yummy things. We want as much as possible to try and maintain healthy eating habits. We don't want to completely lose out on the holiday foods and drinks, because they are everywhere. And a lot of us associate those foods with childhood memories and happy memories, but we know that eating healthy is going to keep us happier overall. You may want to have a plan in place for gatherings. If you know there's going to be a host who wants you to eat or drink too much and you feel that pressure, try this little trick. Compliment them first and then decline.

For example, you say, "I'm so full from the wonderful dinner that you served. I just cannot eat another bite. Thank you so much." This is great because the person will focus on the compliment, and they won't focus on the no.

## **Stress solutions: party moderation**

Here are some pre-party tips that may help you reduce stress. Again, first and foremost, don't feel obligated to go to all the parties, keep yourself balanced and happy. It's okay to have a budget for parties too. If it's a restaurant, check out the place, know what the food costs, the drinks cost. Don't go in unaware and end up overspending, because you were unprepared. And whether it's a house party or a gathering at a restaurant, don't show up famished.

If you do, you're going to overeat and probably choose the wrong things. And for anybody who's ever been to the grocery store when you're hungry, we know that we don't make healthy decisions, or it's harder to make healthier decisions when we're hungry. If you can, maybe eat something healthy before you go. If you do go to a buffet or something like that, go through only once and try to choose items that are really appealing to you. Try to fill up at least half of your plate with some healthier options, and then leave the other half or the 20% of your plate with maybe stuff that's your favorite holiday treat. And then sit with your back to where the food is, so your attention isn't pulled to that.

If there's something you really want, give yourself a bit or versus a slice or whatever. Enjoy the food, but be aware of how much, and then remember why you're there. You're there to be with the people you care about, so focus on the people. Make those memories, make those connections. And remember that if you do decide to have alcoholic beverages, make sure you have a designated driver or an Uber or Lyft or a taxi. Have some kind of plan in place, so you know you'll get home safely.

## **Stress solutions: relaxation**

For a lot of us, what ends up happening is the stress builds. You find that you've gone to a place where you're about to just lose it and start screaming, or throwing things and make decisions that you might regret later.

It's really important that you try to take a break. And if you can try and insert a lot of little breaks in as much as possible into your day, just so you don't get to that point. Doing things like taking a walk, stretching your arms over your head, sticking out your hands, and shaking them, all of these things can help reduce tension in our bodies. It's really okay to give yourself a timeout. Stop what you're doing, find a quiet spot, or go to a quiet place in your

head. Maybe you can take some deep breaths, listen to calming music, choose where you're going to place that mental focus. Maybe you can imagine yourself in a place that feels peaceful and wonderful for you away from whatever it is that's causing you tension.

What's also really important is slow, deep breaths. Even just taking a handful of them, like five deep breaths from your abdomen is really helpful. And deep breathing is highly underrated because one, you can do it anywhere. Two, you can do it at any time and three, nobody has to even know that you're doing it and four, we know it works. Because when you take long, slow, deep breaths, you're sending oxygen to your brain. It makes it easier for you to make good decisions and also, you're sending a message to your brain and to your body that you're relaxed. So, it really can help. Even if you just take a few minutes, like five or 10 minutes, it doesn't have to be a long break, you create a little vacation.

### **Stress solutions: exercise**

Another thing that can be really helpful for people when it comes to managing stress is exercise. You might be thinking, "When am I going to do that? There's already so much to do," but it's really important to carve out that time if you can. You may need to be creative about it. If you're going shopping, park further away from the stores or the restaurant. If you're in a building, take the stairs, instead of the elevator. Just have a plan where you're going to be able to move. It's so important to move. Exercise helps metabolize the cortisol hormone, the stress hormone. So, exercise literally helps release the stress. And a perk is that it can help you burn off some of those extra calories from yummy holiday treats.

### **Stress solutions: worklife balance**

Our next stress solution is work life balance. It's about time management, right? It's trying not to let work tension spill over to home. If you have a really stressful job, make sure that you're taking time to chill out and relax and transition from your work stress before you get home, so when you get home, you can enjoy being with your loved ones. It's so important to have some time alone too, just to decompress, to focus on yourself. It's not selfish, it's self-preservation. And if you have concerns or have goals around family time or just related to the holidays, just have open communication with everybody so that you're not feeling like you have to carry the weight of everything on your own shoulders.

### **Stress solutions: rest**

And finally, take care of yourself. You have to create time. You might have to make yourself just the priority. Put yourself on that to-do list, because nobody else can do it for you as

much as they might love you and care for you. So, plan that relaxation as a gift that you give yourself. Figure out what techniques really help you rejuvenate and refresh, and make sure that you're carving out time for those things. Meditation, yoga, mindfulness, journaling, whatever it is, make time for you. It will help you function, it will help you feel your best, and it will help you keep up with the demands of the holiday season.

## **Conclusion**

This concludes our session for today. I hope you found it helpful, and I'll look forward to seeing you again in the future. Have a happy holiday.

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