

Holiday Stress – Remember, take time to relax

As the holidays approach, many of us look forward to celebrating with our family and friends. But the holidays can also bring added stress to our lives as we try to find the perfect gift, make travel arrangements, prepare a large meal for family gatherings, attend various holiday parties, etc.



Remember to take time for yourself and relax. In order to help relieve stress you can practice several different techniques. From simple meditation to yoga or tai chi, you can find a technique that works for you. And the good news is, some are free and take very little time.

Meditation

Just a few minutes a day can help ease anxiety. According to research, daily meditation might alter the brain's neural pathways, making individuals more resilient to stress.

- Sit up straight with both feet on the floor. Close your eyes. Repeat a positive mantra such as “I feel calm” or “I am positive and peaceful” or “Life does not have to be perfect to be wonderful” either out loud or silently -- Place one hand on your stomach to match the mantra with your breathing. Let any distracting thoughts leave your mind.

Breathing

Take a 5-minute break and focus on your breathing.

- Sit up straight, eyes closed, with a hand on your stomach. Inhale slowly through your nose, feeling the breath start in your abdomen and work its way to the top of your head. Reverse the process as you exhale through your mouth.
- **Square Breathing:** Breath in 2-3-4, Hold 2-3-4, Breath out 2-3-4, Hold 2-3-4. Fill your abdomen when your breath in. Deflate your abdomen when you exhale, pushing it towards your spine. Now try it with your eyes closed, take a normal deep breath in. Let it out. And begin, Breath in 2-3-4, Hold 2-3-4, Breath out 2-3-4, Hold 2-3-4.

Muscle Relaxation

Consult your healthcare provider if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems or other injuries that may be aggravated by tensing your muscles.

- Get comfortable. Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and sit with both feet on the floor or lie down.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out using slow, deep breaths.
- Once relaxed you are ready to start. If you are right handed, begin with your right side. If you are left handed, begin with your left side.
- Focus your attention on your foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in that foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- Then shift your attention to the other foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.
 - (The most popular order starts with the feet and moves to the calves, thighs, hips and buttocks, stomach, chest, back, hand and arm, neck and shoulders and finally the face.)
- Try not to tense muscles other than the ones you are focusing on. This may take some practice at first, until you are familiar with the technique.

Connect With Others

One of the best tools for handling stress is your social network. Talking to others, either face to face or on the phone can give you a fresh perspective while strengthening your connections.

Lighten Up and Laugh Out Loud

You've probably heard the phrase "Laughter is the Best Medicine". Well, a good belly laugh does lower the body's stress hormone (cortisol), and boosts brain chemicals called endorphins, which help your mood. Tune in to your favorite sitcom or video, read the comics or a joke book, go to the local comedy club or chat with someone who makes you smile.

The Power of Music

A slower tempo can quiet your mind and relax your muscles, making you feel soothed while releasing the stress of the day. Research shows that listening to soothing music or nature sounds (birdsong or water sounds – the ocean, babbling brooks, waterfalls) can lower blood pressure, heart rate, and anxiety. Search around to find what produces a sense of calm, familiarity, and centeredness for you as an individual.

Upbeat music can make you feel more optimistic and positive about life. Dancing or moving to music as well as singing along can also provide great tension relief.



Exercise

You don't have to run in order to get a runner's high. All forms of exercise, including walking, dancing, yoga, and tai chi, can ease depression and anxiety by helping the brain release feel-good chemicals and by giving your body a chance to practice dealing with stress. You can go for a quick walk around the block, take the stairs up and down a few flights, or do some stretching exercises like head rolls and shoulder shrugs.

Journaling

You can use journaling to help you deal with stressors you don't feel comfortable sharing with others. Here are some tips to get you started:

- To improve health and decrease stress, journal entries should include two things:
 - First, write what happened --the facts about the objective experience.
 - Second, write your feelings about what happened, what you feel and why you feel it.
- Don't hold back! Write continually until you feel you get it all out. A journal is all about you. You don't need to share with others. Don't worry about spelling or grammar.
- There is no specific length of time or frequency you have to commit to journaling. You should journal whenever you feel you need to, or want to, express your feelings.

You can also try gratitude journaling which helps you remember all the things that are good in your life. Take time to appreciate what you have -- rather than focusing on what you don't have. Write in these journals to capture good experiences and to celebrate accomplishments. Then, when you start feeling stressed, spend a few minutes looking through your gratitude journal to remind yourself of the good things in life and what really matters.