

Avoid extra stress and extra pounds this holiday season

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Everyone knows that the holiday season can wreak havoc on your waistline; most Americans experience serious weight gain between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day. However, it's not just because delicious goodies are accessible at every turn. Holiday stress also drives people to eat. Here's some advice on how to keep your sanity while doing typical holiday activities -- and avoid adding extra pounds.

Traveling. If you plan on traveling to see your children, you'll be hitting the airways, railways and highways at the most congested time of the year. To reduce your stress level, follow these tips:

- Leave yourself plenty of extra time to get to the airport. Then, when you arrive, be sure to leave enough time to get through security screening.
- Wear slip-on shoes that are not a hassle to take off at the security checkpoint.
- Bring healthy snacks. These days, airlines rarely feed passengers anything except salty snacks that will dehydrate you during the flight. Nibbling on nutritious snacks will keep you from drinking too much alcohol or eating fat-laden fast food during a stopover.
- Once you have checked in at your gate, take a walk down those long airport corridors or sprint up and down the stairs a few times. Use the waiting time until your plane boards to get some exercise that will help you relax during the flight.

Entertaining. If your family members are coming to visit you, then the stress of having guests in your house might be daunting - especially if they are unhelpful guests who constantly expect to be fed and entertained. However, the benefit of having everyone at your house is that you get to choose what food to serve. Make

healthy choices, and everyone will win. Remember that most people do not expect everything to be fancy. If you're pressed for time, buy prepared or take-out food to fill in gaps in your meals; no one will criticize if you don't make that delicious apple pie from scratch.

Remember. The most important thing about entertaining is giving people a chance to be together - not to have a perfect house and freshly polished silver (although silver polishing is a good job for grandchildren). Relax, enjoy the company of your guests, and help to make the occasion memorable for all.

Family togetherness. The people we love the most are often the greatest sources of stress during the holidays. First, there is the business of bringing the family together. If it starts to feel like herding cats, keep reminding yourself that the holidays represent just a few weeks out of the year. If you can't pull the whole gang together just then, maybe you can schedule a mid-winter or spring gathering instead.

Second, once everyone is together, there are family dynamics to deal with. Perhaps you feel it is important to make a good impression on your siblings. However, you should avoid the pitfall of pretending everything is perfect if it isn't. Few families can live up to those depictions of harmonious families relishing the holidays that Norman Rockwell painted.

Instead, do your best to catch yourself when old, resentful scripts begin playing in your head (e.g., "My brother always has to be the center of attention"; "My sister never does a thing to help out"), and instead try to communicate your thoughts and wishes to family members in a warm, friendly way (e.g., "Bill, why don't you ask your nephew how many home runs he batted this season?" or "Anne, how about helping me set the table?"). The more you can do to steer clear of angry thoughts and arguments, the less stress you will feel.

Holiday parties. This is the time of year when everyone wants you to come to their party. If your social calendar is filling up fast and starting to overwhelm you, be more discriminating. Before you say "yes" to an invitation, put some thought into



whether it will bring you together with people you really enjoy spending time with. If not, then graciously decline.

When you do attend parties, stay aware of what you are eating and drinking. It is easy to take in too many calories if you are tense or uncomfortable - or nibbling mindlessly while you are talking. I tell my clients to eat something healthy before going to a party so that they will not be tempted to load up their plates. Also decide what and how much you will drink before you get to the party, and stick to that plan. Confine your intake of cream-rich eggnog to small doses; you don't need three glasses to savor its taste.

Beating the holiday blues

For many reasons, the holidays can bring you down. Maybe you're grieving over the loss of a loved one. Perhaps you're disappointed that the entire family won't be together. Or maybe you set yourself up for a let-down by setting unnaturally high expectations for the events and parties you attend.

Here are some ways to keep the holiday blues at bay.

Start new traditions. If the old ways of celebrating are no longer satisfying, embrace new ones. If your family situation has changed, adapt to it. Ask the people close to you what they would enjoy doing, and organize the holidays around those activities. Instead of cooking at home, go to a restaurant. Take everyone to the movies or a play. Setting realistic expectations during these times will help you maintain a healthy perspective.

Take time for yourself. Spend some time relaxing and recharging. Perhaps this means getting up a little earlier than everyone else to meditate, read the newspaper, or exercise. Loads of sugar, extra calories, and holiday drinks can bring you down; exercising will perk you up again. Stick with your daily routine - or start a new one.

Avoid the urge to overdo. Make a list of activities that you'd enjoy this season and then prioritize them. Leave time for doing nothing or doing things spontaneously. To maintain your mental health, it's important that you do not feel overscheduled and constantly coerced.

Get plenty of sleep. Your life is probably busy throughout the year. Add in the rush of holiday activity, and you may feel that there are not enough hours in the day. Don't borrow hours from your sleep time. A good night's rest can help you deal with the stresses of the day. If you miss out on some sleep at night, take a power nap during the day. A snooze of 30 minutes or so will restore your energy without disrupting your nighttime sleep.

Volunteer. Giving to those in need is a great way to de-stress and find true joy during the holiday season. Try donating your time, your talent, or one of your household treasures to a good cause this season. Get your grandchildren involved in a volunteer project. A popular and easy project would be to purchase new gifts for a nursing home or homeless shelter, wrap them up and deliver them. This is an excellent way to set a great example and spend wonderful time together.

Remember: The holidays can be a wonderful time of the year - and you can keep your waistline trim -- as long as you take care of yourself!

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