

Home Matters: Not So Happy Holidays

By Michelle Post, MA, LMFT

As you prepare to savor holiday gatherings, and the accompanying joy, generosity and goodwill traditionally associated with them, here's a prudent reminder: Try to manage, or better yet, exorcise any inner stresses and resentments before you exchange "happy holidays" greetings with family and friends.

If you don't feel stress during the holidays, consider yourself fortunate. Dateline NBC/Prevention Magazine reported that fully 41% of the people it surveyed rated the Christmas and Hanukkah holiday seasons as stressful.

The general belief that there is an increased incidence of suicide during the holidays is a myth. But statistics do show, and therapists do report, an increase in substance abuse, domestic violence, seasonal affective disorder, and stress related to the holidays. How do you deal with stress? First, you must recognize its symptoms, then take steps to cope.

□ Here are some symptoms of stress to watch out for:

- **Emotional signs** include fear, panic, guilt, rage, depression, numbness, crying, self-deprecation, and irritability or mood swings.
- **Physical signs** include increased heart rate, diarrhea or constipation, nausea or vomiting, headaches, shaking or trembling, fatigue, sleep disturbance (having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep), appetite disturbance (lack of interest in food or an increase in eating comfort foods), speech problems, dry mouth, thirst, profuse sweating, itching, dizziness, shortness of breath, poor coordination or clumsiness.
- **Behavioral signs** include increased substance abuse, aggressive or reckless behavior, social withdrawal, jumpiness (being easily startled), diminished sexual interest and function, flashbacks or disturbing images.

If you exhibit more than 20 percent of these symptoms (one in five), don't try to avoid your feelings or numb yourself with alcohol. That can exacerbate sleep disturbance and depress the immune system. Instead, consult your doctor. Also, you might consider taking some time out for self-care, including the following:

- Talk with a good friend or family member about what is stressing you.
- Write in a journal, compose poetry, or draw.
- Take some time for pleasure reading, relaxing, or getting a massage.
- Meditate, pray, or explore your spirituality or your relationship with a higher power.
- Take yoga, exercise, or just get outside for some fresh air.
- Enjoy the outdoors by going to a beach or a park, or hiking a nature trail.
- Go to a movie or a museum.
- Use time management skills to tackle your "to do" list. Don't overbook yourself, wait to the last minute, or try to squeeze in one more stop.
- Eat healthy, energizing foods rather than foods that induce fatigue or numbness.
- Create or construct something by yourself or with friends. PET scans show that the part of the brain activated in healing the body is also engaged when one is involved in creative activities.

Major holidays mean hectic schedules, high expectations, disappointments and spending time with family members whom you love, or sometimes just tolerate. So, it's no surprise some of us are stricken with the "holiday blues." In coming holiday seasons, why not take the time to give to yourself as well as to others?

About the Author

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