

Reducing Stress During the Holiday Season

by Jessica Stygles, Communications Manager

The concept of “the most wonderful time of the year” emotionally drives many of us to do things we wouldn’t normally do. We eat, drink and spend too much at the same time we’re over-scheduling ourselves and not sleeping enough. No matter what your beliefs or which holidays you celebrate – this time of year can be very stressful.

Our Symmetry Wellness team has some tips to help keep your stress in check this holiday season.

Minimize Expectations

Holidays are what we make them. Everyone has preconceived notions of the “perfect” holiday season, but those notions may not be realistic. Actually, the gap between what we “should” be doing and what we are doing accounts for much of our stress.

- » Problem or opportunity? You may be apart from loved ones during the holidays. Use your independence to create your own holiday traditions! Travel, volunteer, catch up on a hobby -- or get out and make friends in your area.
- » Think about what you’re celebrating. By focusing more on the holiday’s true meaning and less on the commercial and social aspects, you’ll feel there’s less you “should” be doing. (This focus is central to Kwanzaa, which is a relaxed, stress-free celebration.)
- » What’s important to you? Decide what you WANT to accomplish. If you’ll enjoy the holidays without extensive decorating and baking – skip them! You’ll have more time and energy for the things you want to do.

Budget and Plan

Much of people’s holiday stress stems from gift giving: wondering what people want, shopping, and overspending.

- » For whom are you shopping? People often spend more than they should because they feel the need to buy for so many people. It’s wonderful to be generous, but not at the expense of your peace of mind. If you have a large extended family, suggest a gift exchange so you have one gift to buy instead of several. Or, make your gifts from scratch.

- » Set a budget. List everyone for whom you’ll shop and, working within your budget, assign a maximum price you’ll spend on each person. By setting limits for each recipient, you can shop with realistic expectations.
- » Ask people what they want. We’ve all scoured the mall during the holidays looking for “just the right gift,” and it’s frustrating when that gift doesn’t present itself. By asking for lists, you can shop for specific items, and your family will get what they really wanted. Giving gift certificates is just as easy.
- » Don’t over-commit. We often try to “get it all in” by attending every function to which we’re invited. Make a calendar of specific days and times for shopping, baking, socializing, etc. If a certain time period becomes overwhelming it’s okay to say no to certain engagements, or to schedule them for a less-busy time. Decide what’s important to you, and what you’ll enjoy. Also, plan time to be alone so you can relax. The more normal you can keep your schedule, the less stressed you’ll be.

Don’t Abandon Healthful Habits

It’s important to maintain diet, exercise, rest and relaxation during the holiday rush.

- » Get adequate rest. Sleep deprivation is the biggest contributor to increased stress, anxiety and diminished coping abilities.
- » Eat something healthful. Balance rich, fatty holiday foods with healthful choices. Limit intake of sweets, but don’t forbid yourself or you may binge.
- » Take time for exercise. Stretch, walk, dance – get moving! Start at 15 minutes a day and work up to 30.
- » Breathe. Practicing slow, deep breathing several times a day will help you to focus and de-stress.
- » Regularly evaluate how you feel. It’s never too late to stop and adjust your focus; you can decide at any time to take charge of your finances and schedule.

Following these suggestions will help you have a more realistic, organized, healthful holiday season with less stress. However, if you are suffering from sustained high levels of stress or anxiety (holiday-related or otherwise), you may find it helpful to talk to an employee assistance professional.”

From the Coach's Playbook: The Ever-Elusive "Magic Bullet"

by M. Scott Stanley, MS

I am often approached by clients looking for the easiest way possible to accomplish a health goal very quickly, or a "magic bullet" that will make them healthier almost overnight. Trust me, I sympathize! I've also been in the position of being intimidated by the thought of putting in the hard work to institute a behavior change. I find this to be the case often when it comes to weight management; people want the weight off and they want it off now! Although I can often share many "tricks of the trade" that can lead to quicker, more effective results, I'm sorry to say that there is no "magic bullet" that will aid in reaching various health goals in a safe, health-conscious way.

However, this is certainly no reason to feel discouraged. In fact, the work and patience you put into behavior change can be one of the most beneficial parts of the journey to better health. Slowly

incorporating changes into your life and meeting short-term goals can help you to become more disciplined and gain greater self-confidence and efficacy. This has the enormous benefit of helping you to learn your own health preferences and how your individual body works, as well as making it much less likely that you revert back to old behaviors that were bad for you. If you put in the hard work now to make some changes, you increase your chance of not having to deal with the same problem at a later date (e.g. if you change your eating habits now, you may not have to deal with being overweight in the future). The overall goal is to help you develop the strategies necessary to foster a life-long change in how you take charge of your health, and give you the knowledge and tools to combat preventable health challenges "head on" without fear of failure.

Quick Fitness Tip: Interval Training

Want to amp up your exercise regimen or break through one of those dreaded plateaus? If so, give interval training a try. The basic idea is that you alternate the intensity of an exercise during a workout with periods of both high and low intensity. An example would be walking at your normal pace for 2-3 minutes, and then jogging for 1-3 minutes, and then back to your normal pace for a few minutes and so on. This method really helps you to improve your fitness level while burning more calories than ordinary steady-state exercise.

Wash Those Hands!

This is just a brief reminder that December 7-13 was National Handwashing Awareness Week! Be sure to wash your hands before eating and after handling germ-y objects with warm, soapy water for 20 to 30 seconds. This will help to keep you from catching those nasty viruses that come around during the cold weather and holidays.

When you need help, call Symmetry Wellness at 419.475.5338 or 1.800.422.5338. It's free and confidential.