Healthy holiday stress management

Do you find yourself worrying about all the hustle and bustle of the holiday season? You're not alone. According to a 2008 American Psychological Association (APA) holiday stress survey, 8 out of 10 Americans anticipate stress during the holiday season.

The pressure to create the perfect holiday for family and friends can cause stress, especially when combined with having limited financial resources. In fact, 60 percent of Americans list a lack of money as the top cause of holiday stress according to the APA survey. A lack of time during the holidays for elaborate decorating, preparing a memorable meal and searching for the perfect holiday gift was also listed as a major cause of holiday stress for Americans.

With hectic schedules and added holiday demand, many Americans deal with the increased stress in unhealthy ways. Overeating and eating unhealthy foods, excess alcohol consumption and sedentary activities like sleeping and watching TV are ways people deal with added holiday stress. Research shows that these unhealthy coping mechanisms can contribute to some of our country's biggest health problems including obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

So how can we cope with the increased holiday stress in a healthy way? Below are some suggestions to make the holidays merrier this year.

- **Know yourself.** Be aware of your stress level and know what stresses you out during the holiday season. Learn your own stress triggers and how to respond to stressful situations.

- **Take time for yourself.** Resist the pressure to be everything for everyone. Taking care of yourself during the holidays helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with stress and to be able to take better care of others in your life.

- **Keep a holiday "To-Do" list.** Creating a list of tasks and marking those with the highest priority will help reduce the risk of forgetting something and help you to better focus on the task at hand.

- **Set realistic expectations**. Create a realistic budget and remind your children that the holidays are not about expensive gifts. Take small concrete steps to deal with holiday tasks instead of overwhelming yourself.

- **Remember what is important.** Commercialism can overshadow the true sentiment of the holiday season. Remind yourself that family and friends are what matter most.

- **Volunteer.** Find a local charity where you and your family can volunteer together. Helping those less fortunate can build stronger family relationships. According to The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research published by the Corporation for National and Community Service, volunteers have greater longevity, a social network to buffer stress, lower rates of depression and less incidence of heart disease.

It's also important that you talk about stress related to the holidays with your friends and family. If you continue to feel overwhelmed or the "holiday blues" do not subside once the season ends, consider talking with a medical professional.

Relax. Take a deep breath. And enjoy the holidays!

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