

Holiday Stress

By - Chris Woolston (www.ahealthyme.com/topic/holidaystress)

(To the tune "Jingle Bells") *Dashing to the mall, in a run-down Chevrolet. Into debt we fall, for the 10th straight holiday. Bill and Bob and Kate, arrive on the next flight. Why can't they go to a Super 8 'stead of crashing here tonight?*

Are your holidays full of sleigh bells, good cheer, warm gingerbread, and Peace on Earth? If so, it may be time to turn off the Claymation television special and wake up to reality. For most people, the holidays include too much time fighting traffic, overloading credit cards, entertaining relatives, and feigning excitement over brand-new, beautifully wrapped Salad Shooters. It's the season when you're expected to cram office parties, shopping, and family gatherings into your already busy life. In short, the holidays mean stress.

Unless you happen to dwell in Bedford Falls circa 1950, the Hallmark version of the holidays is probably out of reach. But don't despair: It's not too late to put a little sanity back into the season. Here are some tips to help you cope with -- or even avoid -- holiday stress.

- **Stay out of holiday debt.** Know your spending limit. If your local mall starts putting up holiday decorations before you're done paying last year's bills, it's time to rethink your gift-giving habits. Expensive gifts won't guarantee a happy holiday. The recipient just might feel guilty instead of elated, especially if the gift isn't really wanted. Even children will be grateful for moderately priced gifts that are chosen with care, especially if you explain that you don't have unlimited funds. If your extended family is filling your shopping list to the brim, consider starting a name exchange. There's a good chance everyone else on the list will appreciate a break, too.
- **Make a shopping list, and check it twice.** Staying organized will help you avoid any oversights or last-minute panic. As a bonus, you'll be less likely to make any impulse purchases that you can't really afford.
- **Avoid a relative meltdown.** If everybody in your family gets along, consider yourself lucky. The holidays give you a great opportunity to spend time together. But if your family is full of conflict and friction, the holidays can become a battlefield. You can clear the atmosphere by involving everyone in the planning and decisionmaking. When a couple of relatives insist on sniping at one another, take it as your cue to go for a walk or tidy up a distant room. If the worst fights tend to happen at the dining room table, consider having your holiday meal at a nice restaurant where everyone is more likely to be on their best behavior.
- **Go easy on alcohol.** A stiff glass of eggnog can be a fine way to toast the holiday, but don't go overboard. Too much alcohol will only add to your stress. You may say or do things that you'll later regret, and you're bound to feel lousy the next day.
- **Keep moving.** Exercise is always a great stress reliever. Instead of watching that Christmas special for the hundredth time, take a brisk walk around the neighborhood with a cousin or slip away with your aunt to the gym for a much-needed break. Even if you get your workout on a treadmill, try to spend some time outdoors. A little winter sunlight can dramatically brighten your mood, especially if you suffer from seasonal affective disorder, depression that sets in as the days get shorter.
- **Eat well and be merry.** That fourth or fifth sugar cookie won't lift your spirits. As hard as it may seem, you can hold onto your healthy eating habits throughout the holiday season. Have a few healthy snacks throughout the day, especially before the Big Meal. If you catch yourself eating to relieve anxiety or loneliness, take a step back from the kitchen and think about the source of your feelings. Confronting your emotions in a healthy way can keep you from overeating.
- **Don't get too ambitious.** Planning on an elaborate craft project with the kids? Keep in mind that a gingerbread mansion would be just as much fun in January. Are you in charge of making a seven-course holiday meal? Ask for lots of help, and don't hesitate to cut it down to four courses. If you're wrapping presents, ask your kids to help out.
- **Take a moment to appreciate the simple things.** Getting into the holiday spirit can be as easy as putting on nostalgic holiday tunes or making your favorite wintertime drink.
- **Stay flexible.** Too many people approach the holidays with a fixed vision of how everything should go. This year, try to keep an open mind. Ask other people what they really want to do and try to accommodate them. You might find that you actually enjoy staying home and playing board games instead of driving around town and looking at the lights.
- **If you're traveling, give yourself plenty of time to get there.** This is especially important if you're traveling with small children. Remember to bring all the toys and supplies you need to keep them occupied if you hit a jam. Whether you're on the road or in the airport, realize that everyone else is in the same predicament. Slow down, take a deep breath, and try to be courteous to the driver or fellow traveler around you.
- **Rein in your expectations.** No holiday in the history of civilization has ever gone perfectly. Spills and squabbles and unwanted gifts are just a part of the season. Don't hold yourself or anyone else up to an unrealistic standard. Just take it all in, relax, have fun, and remember that the holiday season only comes around once a year.