Handling the Holidays

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

2. **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.

3. **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videotapes.

4. **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression too.

5. **Stick to a budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Try these alternatives: Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.

6. **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.

7. **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.

8. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity.
9. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.

10. **Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

11. **Think about what's important.** "Remember that happiness and fulfillment lie in the balance between self-care and caring for others," he says. "Take care of yourself so you won't burn out, so you will be of maximum help to others. That's where you will get maximum fulfillment."

12. **Get involved** in a religious faith based in love, and celebrate that faith.

13. **Socialize.** If you're feeling lonely, find a church or community center where you can be with other people. Sing carols. See a play.

14. **Gather your support group.** Everyone should have someone to talk with about personal problems -- whether it's a support group or a friend, says Goodrick. "Happiness and fulfillment comes from doing constructive work and having loving relationships. Be counselors for each other, commiserate. Don't judge. Just try to help others come up with solutions to problems."

15. **Stay away from booze.** Alcohol changes your mood -- and it also brings out the worst in people. You can have parties without alcohol or high-fat foods.

16. **Exercise every day.** That's especially important when you're eating more. "It's hard to be sad if you're physically fit, if you get enough sleep," says Goodrick.

17. **Avoid TV.** "Most is not designed to make you a better person, or even feel better," he adds.

18. **Don't spend so much.** "You don't have to buy electronic entertainment equipment that far exceeds the human sensory capability to detect the difference," says Goodrick. "I like going to the mall and not buying anything. I get a charge out of that."

19. **Simplify your traditions.** Instead of the big family gift exchange, why not exchange amusing and instructive family stories, tell each other how much we appreciated each other -- or not -- over the years? "Sometimes honesty is good." Goodrick says.

20. **Do something useful** for your community. Visit people at the nursing home.

21. If your family is having problems, don't try to patch them up now, says Kaslow. "Resist the temptation to patch up long-standing family problems. This is not the time of year to do that. It's an emotionally charged time. People put a lot of importance on holiday celebrations. It's easier to patch things up when things are less stressful."