

VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE

Winter 2011

FOCUS

7 Tips to Relieve Holiday Stress

'Tis the season to be merry! But for many of us, it's the season of stress, worry and anxiety. During this time of year, many resort to bad habits—giving into food cravings, overload on caffeine and alcohol. Why? During the holidays, people experience heightened emotions. You may experience loneliness, annoyance with relatives and may be worried about how to pay for gifts without maxing out your credit cards. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), half of all women in the U.S. experience excess stress during the holidays, which may put their health at risk. The APA has also found that during the holidays, 41 percent of women use food and 28 use alcohol as a coping mechanism. Unless you have effective coping mechanisms, effective relaxation techniques, or positive self-talk, all of your worries may trigger over-eating, overloading on alcohol, arguments with loved ones, skipping exercise, not getting enough sleep and neglecting your needs. Since many of us

have ineffectively coped by over eating, excessive drinking, venting, and overspending, here are 7 healthy tips to relieve your holiday stress!

1. **Take calm-down breaks.** In the midst of all the craziness of holidays, it is essential to have these soothing breaks. After you awake in the morning, close your eyes, take several deep breaths and meditate or just relax. "Quieting down your mind before you begin your day can help it get off to a great start and things will flow for you," says Debra Berndt, an expert in creative visualization and hypnosis. In addition, whenever you feel stressed out or anxious throughout the day, take a quick relaxation break to calm yourself down.
2. **Put on rose-colored glasses.** When people attempt to push their bad habits on you, tune into their motives and good intent. For example, before

you get annoyed with Aunt Jane, who keeps urging you to try a piece of her apple pie, first take a deep breath. Then, step into her shoes and realize that Aunt Jane is just showing that she loves you. Then graciously thank them for their misguided attention. Rather than viewing this situation with annoyance, be grateful instead.

3. **Get moving!** The key to kicking holiday stress to the curb, is exercise, exercise, exercise! Research shows that physical activity not only boosts your fitness and energy levels but can also elevate your moods. In addition, exercise has been found to reduce anger, tension, fatigue and confusion. Despite the time crunch around the holidays, you should not cut out your exercise!
4. **Go for real foods mostly.** It happens to everyone at this time of year, you are



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tempted to eat those sugary treats wherever you go. But to deal with stress, it's best to eat foods that grow on trees or in the ground (veggies and fruits!) and to choose healthy fats (such as olive oil), lean protein (such as fish or organic chicken) and nuts and seeds.

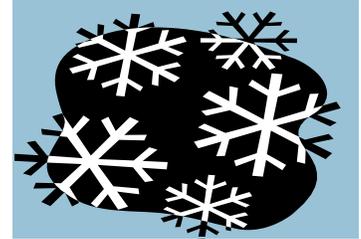
5. **Take polite portions of "comfort" foods and drinks.** 'Tis the season for holiday parties, which makes it easy for us to fall victim to over-use of alcohol, sugar and caffeine. The best way to stay true to the best you is to limit your consumption of such comfort or pleasure foods. When offered these goodies, try to take three to five "polite" bites and sips. Be aware that if you're a sugar ad-

dict, you must be especially vigilant when it comes to deserts.

6. **Prepare "Nice To Do For Me" and "Need To Do For You" lists.** Preparing a written list of all you have to do during the holiday season will keep you get organized. Be realistic as to what you put on your lists. Then start tackling one item from each list. By alternating between lists, you won't feel deprived, because you will be doing for yourself as well.
7. **Be generous.** One of the best ways to stay calm, cheerful and happy during this time of the year is to act generously with your loved ones and friends. This doesn't mean having to spend a lot of money either. You can be generous with your compliments.

When you're creative with your gifts and thank you's, people will appreciate your real, heartfelt sentiments.

Source: Published on December 1, 2009 by Connie Bennett in Smart Habits of Highly Successful People.



According to the American Psychological Association, 41% percent of women use food and 28% use alcohol as coping mechanisms, during the holidays.

Your Guide To Better Sleep

Six o'clock in the morning your alarm goes off, you roll out of bed and downstairs to make your coffee. Already, your tiredness kicks in. We all know that sleep is crucial to having energy and the ability to go about your day. All it takes is one or two sleepless nights to confirm that point. Perhaps it's the cost of being human and having the capacity to worry about the future that disturbs our sleep? However, it's what we do in response to a stint of insomnia that determines whether we will end up with real sleep problems. Unfortunately, most people take special measures to get some rest. They nap in the afternoon or evening, go to bed early the next night, or sleep late that following morning (c'mon, we've all done it!). Every single one of these "corrective" measures interferes with your body's sleep "homeostat," a mechanism that builds up pressure for sleep and helps assure a good night's rest. The homeostatic pressure for sleep depends on how long you have been awake—and how active you are while awake. Hara Estroff Marano spoke to Dr. Michael Perlis, head of behavioral sleep

medicine at the University of Rochester. An expert on insomnia, he has plenty of advice on how to get a good night's rest!

- Get some exercise! It primes the sleep homeostat. By the way, it's a myth that exercise at bedtime is bad.
- Set a regular bedtime—and follow it. Your body needs reliability.
- Gently decrease your body temperature with a warm shower or bath before bed. Exaggerating the normal drop in body temperature that accompanies lying down triggers sleep.
- Don't overheat your environment. Sleep loves cool. Keep your bedroom cooler and use extra blankets.
- Keep your bedroom dark, especially as you get older. Even small amounts of light and noise can disturb sleep as you age.
- Less is more. The less you do in response to a bout of sleeplessness, the faster your sleep pat-

terns will return to normal.

- Look at one or two nights of insomnia as a gift—the gift of time you wanted to get some things done. Insomnia may be functional, a signal that you need to attend to some things that you have put off.
- Don't fight the insomnia—the homeostat makes sleep a self-reparative system—if you stay out of its way.
- Don't worry about the consequences of not sleeping. Worrying about insomnia can create insomnia.
- Do not sleep later to make up for lost sleep. It de-primed the sleep homeostat and reduces pressure for sleep the next night.
- Don't make up for a night of sleeplessness by napping. That undermines the sleep homeostat and makes it less likely you will sleep through the next night.

Source: Author—Hara Estroff Marano, published on October 20, 2003.

The Marshmallow Test

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Professor Walter Mischel's original research at California's Stanford University during the 1960s is regarded as one of the most successful behavioral experiments. He was able to link a child's academic success to whether they could resist eating a marshmallow. Now Prof. Mischel wants to use the original subjects from that study to determine why the ability to delay gratification influences children to become successful adults. He believes that by studying the subjects involved in that original study he can identify the part of the brain where temptation originates. It is also hoped that developing a better understanding of the need for gratification could be used to help those with addiction problems. During his original experiment, Prof. Mischel placed a marshmallow in front of his young subjects and said

they could eat it when he left the room. But if they could wait for 20 minutes until he returned, he would give them a second marshmallow. He found that about a third of his subjects would eat the marshmallow immediately, a third would wait for his return to claim two marshmallows, and the rest would try to wait but gave up at varying times. It was not until 14 years later, when his earliest subjects were leaving school, that Prof. Mischel began to confirm a correlation between the test results and success in life. It was found that those children who immediately ate the marshmallow developed into teenagers who tended to lack self-esteem and experienced difficult relations with their peers. Those who waited for a second marshmallow seemed to develop more social competency, self-assertiveness, and aca-

ademic success. Now those original 40 subjects, who are in their forties, are to undergo brain scans. Prof. Mischel, who now works at New York's Columbia University, hopes to develop strategies for improving self-control by comparing the brain activity of those who waited to eat the marshmallows to those who did not. More immediately, Mischel's test points to the importance of teaching children self control; to resist the notion that all wants must be immediately satisfied. Daily rituals and routines are a training ground by which parents can teach their children how to outsmart desire. Simple things— saving up allowance, or not opening Christmas presents till the morning— are important exercises in cognitive training that equip children for future successes in life.

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Who's Funnier: Men or Women?

In a recent study, men were found to be funnier than women, but just barely and mostly to other men. The typical stereotype is that men are funnier than women. According to Laura Mickes, a postdoctoral researcher in the UC San Diego Department of Psychology, "The differences we find between men's and women's ability to be funny are so small that they can't account for the strength of the belief in the stereotype. In the study, published in the journal *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, researchers used a version of The New Yorker cartoon caption contest to reach its conclusions. Participants in the experiment were 16 undergraduate males and 16 undergraduate females. Participants were instructed to write captions alone in a quiet room for 20 New Yorker cartoons in 45 minutes, for a total of 640 captions and all were told to be as funny as they could be. After completed, 34 male and 47 female undergradu-

ate students helped rate the captions in a five-round knockout tournament: One cartoon image was displayed with two random and anonymous captions, and the raters chose the funnier of the two at their own pace. The process, with new captions each time, was repeated for all 32 captions for each cartoon. The 16 winning captions of round one were then randomly pitted against each other and so on. The number of rounds, from zero to five, that captions survived before being knocked out determined the writer's average scores. Results? Well, true to the stereotype, men did better than women, but not by much. Male writers earned 0.11 more points than female writers. Even more interesting, men did better with other men. Female raters only average 0.06 more points to the male writers, while the male raters gave them a significantly higher average of 0.16 more points. In a second similar ex-

periment, researchers tested memory and memory bias to see if men are credited with being funnier than they really are. As expected, funny captions were remembered better than unfunny ones. So if this study is right, men are just a bit funnier than women. But why? It could be that men see more opportunities to take a stab at humor. It could be that they try harder or more often. Also, when asked to predict their own performance on a scale of one to five, men gave themselves a 2.3 while women gave themselves a 1.5. Further research remains to see why men are the funnier sex. But as for now, the stereotype remains true that men are found to be funnier than women: but not my much!

Source: Author: Inga Kiderra. **Funny Finding: Men Win Humor Test (by a hair), UC San Diego Researchers Used New Yorker Cartoons to Explore Gender Stereotypes.**



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Reasonable Resolutions

As the New Year is just around the corner, many vow and promise to uphold their new year's resolutions. However, many find it difficult to stick to them. Some of us give ourselves far-reaching, unrealistic goals: never drink soda again, pay off all credit card debt, or lose 20 pounds in 5 weeks. Instead of these unrealistic goals, try setting goals that are realistic and reasonable. Check out these resolution ideas:

- Save on energy costs: everyday chores include doing laundry, washing dishes and brushing your teeth. A quick energy save? Using cold water instead. It's one of the easiest changes you can make. It takes a lot of energy to heat water. Reducing the amount used can create big savings!
- Keep It Simple: Instead of making a large to-do list of promises to yourself, try choosing just a few. If your goal is to boost your health and well-being, try starting a single new healthy habit. Focus on it and practice it until it becomes a regular habit. This way, you won't get overwhelmed with too many tasks.
- Indulge-n-pamper night: dedicate at least one night a month to pampering yourself. We could all use a good treat every now and then. Treating yourself to something you enjoy is both fulfilling and relaxing. You'll feel recharged and rejuvenated in doing so!
- Family face-time: We all need to spend time with the ones

we love. But everyone often finds it difficult to schedule enough time to do so. Make it a priority to set aside certain times throughout the week for friends and family. Making the commitment to dedicate time to loved ones shows your appreciation for them and vice versa.

Source: Tide.com

