Keep Calm and Holiday On

Despite the holidays being a joyful time to reconnect with family and friends, it may also bring about stress like no other time of the year. Traveling to spend time with loved ones, preparing and making elaborate holiday dinners, attending parties, shopping, and decorating could leave anyone feeling overwhelmed, irritable, and flat out exhausted.

For some of us, the holidays bring tension to the surface, existing family conflicts, complicated blended family dynamics (divorce/child custody issues), and grieving for a loved one that has died. Missing family members brings about profound mourning.

It is important not to down play holiday season related depression and anxiety. Taking steps to minimize unnecessary holiday stress leaves the door open for us to truly enjoy the season. Most of the time this is accomplished by checking unrealistic holiday expectations at the door.

- Evaluate your holiday expectations. Decide which expectations are achievable and which are not. If you are working full-time and caring for young children or aging parents, volunteering to cook that large holiday dinner may not be doable, especially if you also want to enjoy it. Scale back or go pot luck!

- Be present. Put away cell phones, computers, and other distractions so you can focus on the people who mean the most to you.

- Get enough sleep. Research suggests that seven to nine hours of sleep a night significantly improves your ability to regulate your mood and improves thinking and decision-making skills.

- Delegate responsibility. Try to anticipate when and what you will need help with. Ask for help in advance.

- Make time for exercise. Exercising for 30 minutes a day, a minimum of three days per week, has consistently been shown to improve mood, sleep, and to reduce anxiety.

- Set aside differences. Try to accept family members and friends as they are. Set aside another time to sort out family conflicts and grievances. If you really want to hash it out, save it for Festivus!!

- Stick to a budget. Before buying all your gifts decide on a budget that is reasonable. Remember that love and happiness cannot be bought.

- Stay calm. The best-laid plans often go awry. This is especially true during the holidays. So remember, stay calm, take a deep breath, and holiday on.
How to Take the Joy Out of the Holidays

You don’t need the Grinch’s help to feel exhausted, resentful, and broke by the end of the holiday season:

- **Neglect the basics.** Don’t get enough sleep, eat nothing but sugar, and don’t move except from the car to the store to the car to the door.

I know, it is easy to get carried away and neglect our health during a time of celebratory over indulgences, rushing around, and staying up way too late...right? Keeping some healthy routines during the holiday will allow you to simply feel good and enjoy the season even more.

- **Focus on what you don’t have and can’t do.** ‘Tis the season to feel sorry for ourselves for not being able to buy the gifts we’d like to buy, for not being able to go on a winter vacation, for not being as well off as some family member, friend, or neighbor. Or we can appreciate what we do have and be grateful for the moments when we can do something special with or for someone we love.

- **Dig up memories of past holidays that sucked.** We can relive our disappointments over and over or we can focus on making this holiday season happier and more meaningful. Promise yourself to take charge of some part of the holiday season this year and make a happy memory to look back on next year. Do this enough years in a row and you will build a fund of good memories.

- **Try to get to too many places in too short a time.** Put 500 miles on the car in three days and spend as much time as possible behind the wheel traveling from one party/house to another. Consider spreading out holiday visits over a month or at least a couple of weeks.

- **Threaten your kids.** Continue to be fair and firm in your discipline through the holidays. Sure, outlandish knee-jerk threats work in the short term, but threatening to take back the pony you bought and replace it with a lump of coal as the cost of poor behavior will only make your child resent you in the long run.

- **Over decorate.** Strike a balance between decking the halls and getting in way over your head. Decorating should be fun, perhaps a chance to show case your decorating skill but it shouldn’t feel overly demanding and taxing. Consider taking in holiday decorations that are open to the public as an alternative.

The Gift of Laughter

Laughter really is good medicine. A good belly laugh brings about physiological changes in our body similar to aerobic exercise. Laughing speeds up the heart, increases blood circulation and releases feel good chemicals in our brain. So, are you laughing enough? The average adult laughs about 17 times a day. Is that enough? Did you know the average kindergartener laughs 300 times a day?

The research community is discovering the benefits of humor. According to the American Association for Therapeutic Humor, laughter may have a direct effect on the body’s ability to fight infections, boosting the number of white blood cells that attack viruses and bacteria. Researchers are seeing the connection between laughter and heart attack risk. Laughing eases tension, relieves stress and reduces anger. Want to laugh more?

- Start with smiling. Even a forced smile releases feel good chemicals in our brain, and when you smile at others, they generally smile back.

- Hold a drinking straw with your teeth, rather than holding it with your lips. You subconsciously trick your mind into thinking you are smiling and laughing soon follows.

- Watch a funny movies or comedy stand up show. Avoid news of tragedies and disparities.

- Fake laugh in a group of friends, co-workers, or family (even strangers). Laughing is contagious and you’ll end up really laughing because others are.

- Spend time and hang out with that friend with a good sense of humor.

Limit time with friends that tend to overly complain.

- Put funny sayings and photos up on your refrigerator, mirror, and computer desktop to help you chuckle when needed.

- Take funny selfies with friends. Use smart phone app filters to take the funny up a notch.

- Have a pocket full of good jokes to tell.

- Lastly, don’t take yourself too seriously. Laugh at your own foibles...it helps.
Alone for the Holidays

Perhaps being along for the Holidays was anticipated or completely unplanned. However, it may have happened, being alone doesn’t mean you have to be lonely. Below are some ideas on how to survive and perhaps even enjoy the holidays:

Adjust expectations. The holidays have many built-in traditions. Sometimes how the holidays “should be” doesn’t match up with reality and is more of a fantasy. There’s this idea that it’s supposed to be perfect, and when it’s not, then something must be wrong with me. Be flexible with expectations and open to something different.

Join in with Others. Call friends and ask to be included in whatever they’re doing. Offer to bring a dish or ask how you can contribute to the gathering. Most people love opening their homes and expanding the celebration.

Make your own. Create an “alternative family” made up of people whose company you enjoy. Plan and prepare a potluck feast if you like. You may not be the only person alone during the holidays. Get together with others and have some fun.

Plan an outing or road trip. Go to the movies, a park or a museum. Enjoy the outing by yourself or invite others.

Treat yourself. Do whatever you enjoy doing. Treat yourself to a day of beauty at a spa, get a massage or find some other special way to luxuriate.

Reach out. If you can’t be with family or loved ones during this time of the year, send them letters or e-mails, call or video chat.

Help others. Volunteering at a mission or shelter for the homeless will help you feel connected and your holidays more fulfilling.

Travel. If you have the finances, get away for a few days. Some travel agencies and destinations offer tour groups and specials during the holidays.

Start a new tradition. If spending time thinking about old traditions is making you sad, maybe it is time to start a new tradition.

Get through the day. If you’re unable to do any of these things, just get through it. Read a book/magazine, rest, or rent a good movie.

The Winter Blues

Seasonal depression, also known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a subtype of depression that occurs and ends around the same time every year. Seasonal depression typically occurs when the seasons change and most symptoms begin in the fall and continue into the winter months.

What are the symptoms?

- Depression: despair, apathy, lethargy, loss of motivation, guilt, and hopelessness
- Anxiety: tension and irritability
- Sleep problems: oversleeping, difficulty staying awake, or disrupted sleep
- Social problems: avoiding and isolating from others

What Causes it?

Research suggests that less sunlight affects our production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that impacts mood. This is important because lower levels of serotonin have been linked to depression.

Melatonin is another possible cause. Melatonin is a hormone released by a gland in our brain that helps regulate sleep patterns and mood. Melatonin is produced at increased levels when there is less light. Therefore, when days are shorter and darker the production of this hormone increases.

What can be done?

Discussing with a medical or mental health provider is the first step. Phototherapy or light therapy has been shown to suppress melatonin levels and increase serotonin. Light therapy been effective in up to 85 percent of diagnosed SAD cases.

Antidepressant drugs are an option to be discussed with your doctor or counselor. Lastly, a particular brand of talk counseling called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is also effective for addressing depression related disorders.
The Holidays Sober

Remaining sober is especially hard during the holidays. Here are some practical tips:

- Plan each day of the holiday season
- Have a list of supportive people to call and keep it on you
- Avoid H.A.L.T. (Being Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired). These are often common triggers that risk relapse
- Stay clear of tempting people, places, and activities
- Find and attend meetings
- Volunteer with a charitable organization
- Write a letter to yourself titled, “How I stayed sober over the holidays.”
- Revel in your sobriety each day!

EAP Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist employees who develop behavioral/emotional problems that may directly affect their work performance, and to provide Key Personnel with policy and procedural guidelines for the management of these problems.

City of Milwaukee Events and Reminders

- Not feeling well? Visit the Workplace Clinic (841 N. Broadway, Milwaukee, WI. 53202 (Zeidler Municipal Building) for no cost onsite health care services. Call 414-777-3413 for information or to schedule an appointment.

- Free screening, consultation, and education services to prevent and treat potential musculoskeletal injuries. Schedule an appointment with a physical therapist at the Early Intervention PT Clinic. Call 414-777-3413 to schedule an appointment.

- Health4Me™ is a United Health Care (UHC) mobile app that provides instant access to your family’s critical health information, anytime/anywhere. Find a physician, check the status of a claim or speak directly with a healthcare professional.

Last Minute Gift Ideas

1. Give experiences. Gift certificates to restaurants, tickets for a cultural or sporting event are good gift options. They may be bought on-line but many may be purchased from store-front locations.

2. Personal touch. Pressed for time but don’t want your gift to look like an after thought? What do you do well? Are you crafty enough for a hand done card? What kind of food do they like and can you either make it or get it easily.

3. eBooks and subscription services. Have a book beamed to their nook/kindle. Order a magazine or catalog subscription to be mailed to their home.

City of Milwaukee

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