

Daily Union Article  
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Title: Handling Holiday Stress

It's officially the holiday season. A season often equated with festivities, family meals, travel, and yes – stress. Holiday stress seems to creep in with all the many positive experiences the season has to offer. How can you manage the emotional challenges of the season and still enjoy the time we spend with family and friends?

Dealing with holiday stress begins when you recognize its presence. Stress is the way your body responds to experiences and events. It helps you rise to the challenge you are facing in addition to preparing you to meet tough situations. Stress isn't all bad, though. Stress can give you focus, strength, endurance, and increase our ability to tune in to what is happening around you. There are a variety of stressors, or events that cause stress, that affect each person in their own unique way. Some stressors are caused by negative events such as an argument with your partner, chronic illness of a loved one, being in physical danger, or financial challenges. The loss of a loved one earlier in the year can increase stress levels during the holidays as you continue to grieve your loss.

Stress affects your body on many different levels. It can affect your emotional responsiveness, your nervous system, your reactivity, your physical well-being and trigger specific hormones. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and metabolism. Your body's physical and chemical reactions prepare the body to react quickly and efficiently to cope with what is happening in that moment.

This reaction is known as the stress response. When it works properly, your stress response elevates your ability to perform or react appropriately under pressure. The key here is that it is empowering when it works properly.

Sometimes the stress response doesn't work the way you want or need it to. When under excessive stress or experiencing chronic stress from life events that are characteristically longer term (divorce, moving, illness), the body's reserves are weakened and compromised. What results is a body that is weary and tired with a weakened immune system.

You can't escape stress in your life, but you can work to ensure you manage it so that stress doesn't have control over your holiday season.

In their online Healthy Living Series, the American Heart Association (AHA) recognizes the threat to your health that stress may cause. The AHA offers these top 5 tips for a Healthy Holiday Season:

**1. Keep up healthy habits.**

Make a pact with yourself during the holidays. For example: "For the next three weeks I will move more and do something active every day, have a healthy breakfast and limit the sweets, and get at least seven hours of sleep each night." If you don't completely

give up your healthy habits, you won't feel like you have to start over once the holidays are in the rear-view.

## **2. Beware of party perils.**

Special holiday events often serve up extra helpings of less-than-healthy foods. If you're a guest, eat a healthy snack before you go to avoid overdoing it at the event. If you're the host, challenge yourself to offer some delicious and healthier options using our recipes and cooking tips. Your guests will thank you.

## **3. Stay active — even in the hustle and bustle of the season.**

A full holiday social calendar might lead to some missed workouts. Instead of beating yourself up about it, sprinkle some healthy activities into your daily routine. For example, if the weather isn't too frightful, ride your bike to work or school. If dinner is going to be a feast, opt for a light lunch, then take a vigorous walk. And keep the family moving. When the kids are home from school, squeeze in some active chores and trips to the park.

## **4. But not too active.**

Give yourself the gift of peace. When the invitations pile up, don't be afraid to say no to some of them. If you need some down time to recharge for the next big party, declare a "me-treat" and do something that relaxes you. Try yoga, meditation, or spending time in nature.

## **5. Make a plan for the New Year.**

Your poinsettia's pooped and the gifts are all gone. Now what? It's a great time to reset for the New Year — but don't go dashing through your to-do list too fast or you might not stick to your plan. Lay out realistic, sustainable steps for the months ahead. For example, start a daily walking routine and sign up for your local Heart Walk before you set your sights on that marathon!

*Source: <https://www.heart.org/> search for Holiday Stress*

Again, you cannot avoid stress but you can choose to manage it wisely. As the holiday season revs up into high gear this next month, take some time to identify the sources of stress in your life. What stressors can you change or avoid? If you can't do either of these, how can you reduce your exposure to those things that cause you stress? If you have a large number of family members coming to your house that only you and your spouse live in, that can cause a lot of stress. Can you meet at a restaurant? Is there space to spread out in your house beyond the dining room? Can you get food catered in or order it in advance from the grocery store to eliminate the stress of a congested kitchen?

Each person's response to stress is unique, but the 5 tips offered by the American Heart Association offer a good start to anyone who desires to reduce and manage their stress during the holiday season. Keep your holiday season fun and relaxing by minimizing the amount of stress you encounter. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!