


wellness

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How to Get a Handle on Holiday Stress, dealing with in-laws, poor coping strategies, and more...

Story by Cristine Cioppa



If the holiday season has you breaking out in hives, you're not alone. Many women suffer from stress-related health symptoms due to holiday stress. In addition to skin problems, stress can manifest as other symptoms, such as aches and pains, headaches, digestive problems, moodiness, agitation, and changes in sleeping and eating patterns. The good news is that there are ways to get a handle on stress so you can enjoy—and make the most of—this holiday season. "So often women find themselves acting as caretaker for the many important people in their lives—partners, children, parents, friends," says Jessica Levitt, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Fairfield, Connecticut, who specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy and stress management. "Despite the fact that many women enjoy this role, it can easily get out of hand and become a huge stressor, especially during the holidays."

On top of this, there's the pressure of entertaining, shopping, cooking, cleaning and, in some cases, managing difficult relationships with in-laws or family members. What makes managing stress sometimes difficult is that there is no single best technique to manage it, and not everyone experiences stressful events the same way. "There is no one-size-fits-all solution to managing stress," says Dr. Levitt. "One strategy may work in one context, while you may need a different strategy in another situation," she adds.

Focusing on positive ways to manage stress is key. In general, many people do, such as with exercise. But, there is still a portion of the population that resorts to unhealthy behaviors to manage stress. According to the most recent American Psychological Association (APA)

be hard to break that pattern. She has found similar findings with overeating. Dr. Sinha explains that overeating and excessive/binge drinking changes a person's biology. This in turn affects one's ability to cope and manage stress, as well as make decisions and regulate emotions effectively, she says. To sum it up: A person's biology changes with the negative behavior. The negative behavior can increase stress and dysregulate the body's stress response. This can bolster the negative behavior - creating a vicious cycle, explains Dr. Sinha.

Resources available at the Yale Stress Center can help people who are stuck. For example, there's a 16-week program for stress-related eating that focuses on weight management. "It's a clinical eating program that targets stress. Most lifestyle programs don't provide stress man-

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"Stress in America" survey, which was released in 2012, 25 percent of Americans report eating to manage stress and 13 percent report drinking alcohol to manage it.

Rajita Sinha, PhD, director of the Yale Stress Center at Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, studies stress-related behaviors and has found that it's hard for some people to get out of a negative pattern. If the negative pattern is, say, drinking too much alcohol to cope, alcohol use may continue to go up and it may

agement. We include that with nutrition and exercise. People get more of a complete lifestyle program with behavioral lifestyle coaching," explains Dr. Sinha. (The next 16-week weight management program will start in January. For information, send an e-mail to stressvisit@yale.edu or call 203-737-3398.)

At Yale, there's also a clinical trial underway for stress-related drinking. "We are testing a medication," says Dr. Sinha, which looks at the stress connection and behavior cycle. The Yale Stress Center also

provides general stress management tips encouraging positive behaviors: exercise, time management, adequate sleep, healthy eating, healthy activities and setting realistic goals.

Fortunately, approximately half of Americans polled for the APA survey report coping with stress through positive behaviors such as exercise and listening to music. However, stress keeps 42 percent of Americans lying awake at night and leaves 37 percent irritable and angry. One in five Americans report having "extreme" levels of stress (scores of 8-10 on a scale of 1-10).

One thing the APA suggests is to identify what's causing stress. Around the holidays, for many people it's their struggles with in-laws or other family members. Dr. Sinha says those scenarios are "ripe for stress" and that family dynamics, from feeling stuck in the middle or not feeling able to express things, increases anxiety, frustration and anger. While some of the general stress management tips may work, Dr. Sinha emphasizes emotional regulation and control, especially over judgmental thoughts, such as blaming yourself for the inability to turn around a situa-



tion or your relationship with a family member. These judgmental thoughts won't help and can create stress, says Dr. Sinha.

"If you're stuck thinking, 'I should be able to confront my spouse and in-law about not wanting to do something,' or whatever the issue is—you put pressure on yourself and become judgmental," says Dr. Sinha. This judgment can be of self, of where the other person is coming from, of the situation never changing, and so on. While changing judgmental thoughts is hard, Dr. Sinha suggests that a behavioral therapist can help.

Dr. Levitt suggests trying to structure family visits to make them the best possible. She poses these questions to women: "What activities can you plan so that everyone can enjoy being together? Who can you invite to be a buffer? How can you bring out the best in your family?" She adds, "Visualize handling the more difficult scenarios. Plan how to handle it in the moment so that you are comfortable and proud of yourself." And if you start to feel physical signs of stress, she says know what techniques you can use to relax yourself: Take a break; take a walk; go to the bathroom and collect yourself; grab your husband and talk for a moment. "The worst thing you can do is ignore the physical signs," she says, because it puts you on the path for exploding, resulting in a worse feud or feeling sorry about what happened. Other things you can do to prepare yourself: Keep yourself hydrated; eat well; and think about doing some mindfulness exercises or yoga, or signing up for a stress reduction program that might help you focus

on one thing at a time—staying in the moment, says Dr. Sinha.

"Some people may feel lonely and be missing loved ones, or disappointed with their finances or career during this time of year. No matter what situation you find yourself in this holiday season, take some time to ask yourself what you are grateful for, how you can set realistic expectations for the holidays, and what experiences could help you make the holiday meaningful for you this year," says Dr. Levitt. "When you take care of yourself, you are better able to manage stress, care for others and find joy in your life," adds Dr. Levitt.

When should you consider seeking out a psychologist or a licensed mental health professional to help you through? "Generally, when you feel things are getting worse rather than better, that is a good time to seek help," advises Dr. Levitt.

If you choose to seek help, don't feel bad about it. "It's not a weakness," says Dr. Sinha. "Sometimes we need a little coaching or guidance."

Visit yalestress.org for stress management tips, mindfulness techniques, programs and services (including mindfulness and stress reduction workshops and retreats), and other resources. Visit the American Psychological Association's Psychologist Locator tool at locator.apa.org to find a local psychologist who specializes in stress-related issues.

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