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Holiday Stress Tips

MIND/BODY HEALTH: MANAGING HOLIDAY STRESS

The holidays can be a stressful time for many people due to the intensified focus on family, work and money, but this added stress is felt more by women. In a recent survey on holiday stress, the American Psychological Association (APA) found that women are more likely than men to report heightened stress levels during the holiday season, and that they're less likely to take time to relax or manage that stress in healthy ways.

Research shows that stress, and the unhealthy behaviors people use to manage it, contribute to some of our country's biggest health problems such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes. So it's imperative that people take steps to address issues like holiday stress in healthier ways. According to psychologist and APA Executive Director for Professional Practice Dr. Russ Newman, people who manage stress by engaging in unhealthy behaviors such as overeating, drinking and smoking are likely to have their physical health negatively affected over time, as opposed to people with a healthy lifestyle.

"My advice is to pay attention to what causes stress and to find healthy ways to manage it," says Newman. "Everyone responds to their stress in some way. The key is handling stress in a manner that doesn't make things worse."

APA recommends these tips to help deal with holiday stressors and build resilience:

Define holiday stress — How do you experience stress? Does that experience change during the holidays? Different people experience stress differently. How do you know when you are stressed?

Identify holiday stressors — What holiday events or situations trigger stressful feelings? Are they related to work, home, relationships or something else?

Recognize how you deal with stress — Determine if you are relying on unhealthy behaviors like smoking or eating to manage stress. Is this a behavior you rely on year-round, or is it specific to holiday stress?

Change one behavior at a time — Unhealthy behaviors develop over the course of time. Replacing unhealthy behaviors with healthy ones requires time. Start small and focus on changing one behavior.

Take care of yourself — Taking care of yourself during the holiday season helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with stress. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in holiday activities that you enjoy and find relaxing. Exercise regularly. Eat healthy. Make sure you get enough rest and sleep.

Ask for support — Accepting help from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens your resilience and ability to manage stress. Use the holidays as a time to reconnect with friends and family and strengthen your support network. If you feel overwhelmed by stress, then consider seeking professional help. Psychologists are uniquely trained to understand the connection between the mind and body. They can offer strategies to help you manage stress, change unhealthy behaviors and address emotional issues.

The American Psychological Association has more tips and strategies for managing stress. For more information, please visit www.APAhelpcenter.org.