

Women's Health Research Institute

Putting Women First

December 2013

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Dear Friend,

Happy December; the holiday season is upon us! This time of year may be exciting and enchanting, but it can also be exhausting. It is important to understand and manage seasonal stressors to ensure a happy holiday season for you and your loved ones.

We've compiled a newsletter filled with tips on relaxing and taking care of yourself through these winter months. The best way to manage your holiday stress is to be aware of your stressors and avoid situations that will induce stress. We hope you relax and enjoy the season!

Sincerely,

The Institute Staff

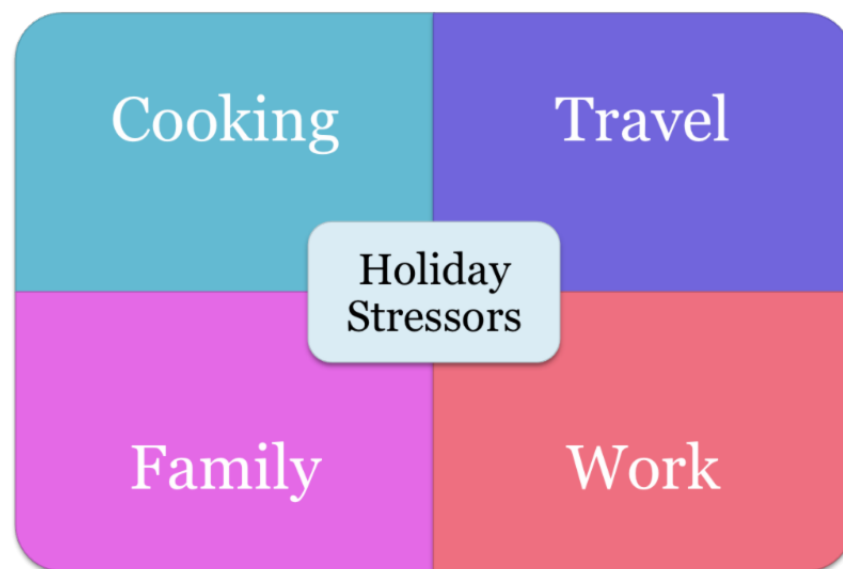
Tackling Holiday Stressors

Do you ever find yourself stressed during the holiday season? You're not alone! Research by Consumer Reports reveals that 90% of Americans suffer from at least

one stressor during the holiday season. With December filled with increased cooking, traveling, and shopping, it's no surprise that this season can take a toll on our emotional systems.

While stress is often easy to manage in the short-term, extended stress can cause one to become vulnerable to a myriad of serious health problems. For instance, stress affects one's breathing--whether one begins breathing faster, feeling shortness of breath, or hyperventilating--the respiratory system goes into over-drive. Over time, continued strain on this system can make one more susceptible to upper-respiratory infections. One's immune system is also threatened by long-term stress. Continued stress can leave one more susceptible to infection and skin conditions such as eczema, hives, and acne. Other health outcomes from prolonged stress can be found at [WebMD](#).

Because stress so greatly affects our emotional and physical health, it is necessary to stay on top of stress during the holidays. Here are the four primary holiday stressors:



Managing Each Stressor

Cooking: The pressure of cooking for large groups of people is an understandable pressure. Planning ahead and managing your time while cooking are your keys to de-stress in the kitchen. Here are a few tips to help keep you cool over the stove:

- Write down the full menu from drinks to dessert.
- Include one menu item that requires last-minute prep which others can help you prepare in the last 20-25 minutes of cooking.
- Cook what you are comfortable cooking; do not overextend yourself.
- Don't waste your time and energy stressing about the table decorations--sprucing up the table with a bowl of lemons, artichokes, or apples adds

color and festivity while using items you already have at home.

- Let others help you in the kitchen. Most people enjoy feeling useful, and it takes some of the pressure off of you.
- Consider hosting a potluck dinner so every dish is not your responsibility.



Travel: The stress of packing and transporting yourself and loved ones from point A to point B is exacerbated by the fact that everyone else is *also* traveling--creating congestion, tension, and stress. Furthermore, stress is formed when you worry about things out of your control back home and on the road. Therefore, here's a list of things *not* to worry about while traveling:

- Your e-mail: You're on vacation, which means taking a break from the stressors of your inbox. Set up a default "away message" and plan to get home a day early to go through your inbox and to get back into your routine before returning to work.
- Getting lost: Exploring new places can be exciting, but getting lost is a huge stressor. Plan ahead and pack maps, track your route, and stay calm if you are forced to go off course.
- Keeping track of your itinerary: Planning is important, but if your planning becomes too involved with folders of information and papers, try using the [Triplt](#) app to compile your itinerary in one place.
- Keeping your family entertained while traveling: Here's a [list](#) of 10 excellent games to play with your family in the car. Another idea is to rent a family-friendly book on tape from your local library to listen to while you drive.



Family: Everyone loves spending time with their family, but that doesn't mean there isn't stress involved. Here are some ways to manage familial stress:

- If children are involved in your holiday festivities, plan their activities first. Making sure the kids are occupied will help release the stress of planning activities for all ages.
- Make sure there is time where nothing is scheduled or planned. Being spontaneous and having wiggle room in your schedule takes the pressure off of you to have every moment planned out.
- Don't feel pressured to spend time with all your family on the specific holiday date. Especially if your family is located in many areas, it can be difficult and stressful to accommodate everyone's schedule. It's just as meaningful to spend time with family and friends on non-holiday days.
- Start new traditions with your family.
- Communicate effectively with your family so everyone is aware of your

expectations and limitations.

Work: Balancing your work and your home life is always challenging, but the holiday season often brings added pressures to complete tasks before the year ends. Here are some ideas to gracefully attend to your work needs while also allotting time to enjoy the season:



- Prioritize your tasks. Listing your tasks in order of priority will help you focus on the most pressing projects first. Once time-sensitive items are out of the way, it is less stressful to focus on lower-item tasks.
- Delegate your responsibilities. Learning to say "no" in your workplace may be difficult and even impossible, but you need to establish work boundaries and only tackle the projects that are truly under your jurisdiction.
- Take a break. Allotting at least five minutes a day to stretch, take a walk, or grab a cup of coffee will rejuvenate you and enable you to stop the flow of stress hormones.
- Eat vegetables and sleep normal hours. Keeping a healthy eating and sleeping routine will help keep your energy up at work and will increase your productivity and decrease your stress.



Seasonal Ways to De-Stress

- Cuddle up and read a book. Research at the University of Sussex found that just six minutes of reading can slow the heart rate and decrease muscle tension.
- Volunteering during this season is a great way to give back to those less fortunate, and a survey by UnitedHealthcare found that 73% of volunteers attest that volunteerism reduces their stress.
- Give a gift. The University of British Columbia and the Harvard Business School found in their research that people report greater happiness when they buy gifts for others or donate funds to charities than they do when they buy gifts for themselves.
- Take time to smell the cinnamon and peppermint. WebMD reported that smelling cinnamon or peppermint can reduce fatigue and frustration while driving. Peppermint, in particular, reduces behind-the-wheel anxiety.



Depression During the Holidays

Sometimes holiday stress can manifest itself into depression. There are many triggers for depression during the holidays, so it is important to understand your emotions and manage your stress and depression in healthy ways.

- Family gatherings can trigger unpleasant memories, so it is important to not expect the worst and focus on one thing at a time. If you anticipate your family gatherings will trigger depression, make sure you have a trusted relative or friend with you to help you get out of a bad situation, should one arise.
- Over-committing is another trigger that may cause unhappiness during this season. Feel comfortable saying "no" if you have too much on your plate, and make a commitment to yourself to stay mentally healthy. Delegating responsibilities will ease the burden off of you.
- Financial pressures are also common during the holidays, but people often forget that you don't have to spend more--or even anything--to show your loved ones you care. Create a budget when shopping and plan gifts ahead of time to avoid impulse-buying. A homemade treat, framed photograph, or hand-written note inside a book often means more than an expensive gift.
- Unrealistic expectations of perfection often set us up to feel failure. Life is continually hectic, even more so during the holidays. Avoid the pressure to be perfect by letting go of the need to please everyone.
- Being away from family and friends during the holidays may also trigger depression. If you are unable to make it home this holiday, branch out and celebrate new traditions with friends who are in town. Planning a future family visit can also help you cope and take your mind off the present. Also, volunteering by helping others in need will help you put your life in perspective.
- The shorter days and lack of sunlight this time of year can also affect your mood. Sadness, anxiousness, loss of interest in activities, and increased sleep or lethargy can be signs of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Please see your doctor if you feel you may suffer from this, treatment is available.

Depression is serious. If you feel that your mood and stress levels during the holiday fluctuate significantly, please reach out to your doctor to learn of coping and treatment options.

Sources

1. [The Huffington Post](#)
2. [WebMD](#)

Author:

Megan Castle, Program Coordinator, Women's Health Research Institute

Health Tip: Keep Healthy During the Holidays

The holidays bring a slew of goodies and cooking that can put your healthy weight goals on the back burner. Here are some simple tips to follow to keep your weight balanced when temptations abound.



Don't skip meals. Often people will attempt to compensate a large meal by skipping other meals during the day. However, if you sit down to your large dinner starving after foregoing lunch, you may overeat and disrupt your metabolism, so stick with three meals a day!



Keep appetizers to a minimum. Dietitian Karen Diaz says many holiday appetizers are about 60 calories per bite. Therefore five bites of your favorite appetizer could land you 300 calories, which is half the amount you might eat for a typical dinner.



Let yourself indulge on a treat. Trying to abstain from holiday goodies altogether may actually lead to an unintentional binge later on. Rewarding yourself with a small treat per day will help you keep on track while also enjoying the foods of the season.



Keep track of what you drink. Holiday foods are not the only culprits of potential weight gain, festive drinks such as eggnog and hot chocolate pack their share of calories. Sweet alcoholic drinks can contain lots of sugar, so it's important to keep track of what you drink.



Don't obsess about your weight and gym-going. Fixating on what you can and cannot be doing can add stress during the season. Research indicates that gym attendance is lower in December than at any other time of the year--so don't beat yourself up for not going! If you can't fit the gym into your routine, maybe you can try some [at-home workouts](#).

Source: [Real Simple](#)

INSTITUTE HAPPENINGS

WHRI Advocates for Women in STEM

The Women's Health Research Institute has always been a proponent for gender equity

in scientific research. The inception of the WHRI Leadership Council has inspired the institute to advocate for gender equity across all science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines at Northwestern. The shockingly-low representation of STEM-field female faculty and leaders at Northwestern and at other leading institutions is a national concern. The WHRI is deep in planning to implement new ways to increase the reach of female faculty within STEM-departments in order to combat these national statistics.

Institute Welcomes New Employees

The Women's Health Research Institute is happy to welcome Christina Arroyo and Megan Castle as full-time employees of the Institute. Ms. Arroyo will manage the Illinois Women's Health Registry, while Ms. Castle will direct the Women's Health Science Program, and both will lend their abilities to the upkeep of institutional daily tasks. Ms. Arroyo and Ms. Castle are thrilled to join the WHRI team and are committed to the mission and goals of the Institute.

Institutional News

A recent supplement to Crain's Chicago Business's "Executive Health Series: Women's Health" featured two WHRI programs: the [Illinois Women's Health Registry](#) and the [Menopause Website](#).

WHRI Blog

The Women's Health Research Institute's blog features posts covering a myriad of women's health issues. New blogs are posted weekly and we encourage you to read the content and post your thoughts and comments on women's health issues.

The [WHRI blog](#) is a way to connect readers to health news and innovations by offering a reliable, unbiased source of information relevant to women of all ages.

UPCOMING EVENTS

[December 17, 2013, Monthly Forum, 12:00pm "What's New in Pelvic Floor Disorders?" presented by Kimberly Kenton, MD](#)

[February 1, 2014, 7th Annual Women's Cardiovascular Health Symposium](#)

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