

The effects of holiday stress on your body and mind

December 16 2016, by Katie Williams



Credit: University of New Mexico

While you bake, deck the halls and try to pick out the perfect gift, there are stressors on your body that you may not recognize that are affecting your overall well-being. It may be no coincidence you get that annual flu or cold in December in addition to feeling like your pants were shrunk in the dryer.

It should be no surprise that many of the main holiday stressors include gift giving obligations, expenses out of budget, lack of time and ability to pick out the perfect gift. With so many expectations, on top of your usual workload, you are putting your body under pressure to help you get everything done. No matter how organized you are, holiday chores are still completed at a great price.

Stress itself doesn't hurt us, but how we respond to it does. It can affect your health temporarily or long term. There are three stages to how your body handles [stress](#):

The Alarm Stage, consisting of increases in heart rate, blood pressure and energy needs in addition to decreased immune system effectiveness. These changes are from the release of hormones preparing the body for action.

The Resistance Stage, consisting of adjustment or adaption to a specific type of stress and the breakdown of related hormones. This process takes time and is the reason your body may feel stressed even after the real or perceived stress is no longer present. During this phase, there is also an increase in [heart rate](#), oxygen to the muscles, general sleepiness and hunger.

The last stage is Stress Exhaustion. This is when the stressor is not removed and the body's energy levels can fall below normal levels. If forced to constantly react and adapt to stressors, your body is at risk for stress exhaustion—the point where your body can no longer effectively deal with the stressor. As a result, health conditions include weight gain, some cancers, migraines, heart disease, hypertension and immune disorders.

You may not be aware of the added stress you are under around the holidays. After all, you do this every year. But learning to recognize the

symptoms of stress is the first step in effectively managing it. Some signals that will alert you to excessive stress include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability or moodiness
- Decreased satisfaction with tasks
- Persistent feeling of urgency
- Clammy and sweaty hands
- Cold hands and feet
- Tension headaches, backaches, stomachaches or other physical discomforts

How to Manage

After reading the first half of this article you have now been given a promotion to manager. Your job, keep stress in line.

Your duties as assigned by UNM Employee Health Promotion include:

- Take care of yourself. Eating healthy foods and getting plenty of rest will help you maintain your body's resistance to the physical symptoms of stress.
- Manage your time. Take charge of your day by scheduling your time and focusing on your goals. Create a list of tasks to accomplish. Be sure to cross items off your list as they are completed.
- Identify the messages you give yourself. Focus on what you can do rather than your limitations. Be positive.
- Try deep muscle relaxation. Start by tensing your shoulders for about 10 seconds. Slowly release the tension and you will begin to feel your muscles relax. Try this exercise for all major muscle areas from your shoulders to your feet.
- Make time for fun. Take a break from your normal routine

during the day to ease tension. Physical exercise or just a change of scenery, such as an evening at the movies, can help you relax.

UNM Employee Health Educator Vanessa Roybal has more targeted suggestions for managing the holiday workload.

Gift-Giving:

- Make a list of everyone you need to buy a gift for.
- Look for gifts you can give to multiple people or shop at stores where you can buy gifts for many on your list.
- Plan a few back-up gifts or generic gifts.
- Focus on the point of gift-giving.
- Don't enjoy shopping? Plan shopping for single day event if possible or internet shop.
- Ask people what they want instead of scouring the earth to find the perfect gift.
- Shop early, when there is more of a selection.

Holiday Expenses:

- Set a budget and stick to it.
- Check your emotions at the store door.
- Think of alternative ways to give gifts. Set up a gift exchange, homemade gifts, or food items.
- Choose inexpensive ways of entertaining and enjoying. An example of this is having a potluck party.
- Look for extra ways to stash cash throughout the year.
- Consolidate or eliminate gifts.

Lack of Time:

- Complete your gift shopping early.
- Prioritize your invitations or party obligations.
- Delegate, Delegate, Delegate.
- Buy prepared foods, instead of cooking everything.
- Cook and freeze foods ahead of time
- Avoid time crunches by making plans to visit some friends and family after the holidays.
- Stop to enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Anticipation and Expectations

- Be realistic: Everything will not be perfect.
- Adjust your expectations: Expect some challenges.
- Relish traditions: Focus on positive traditions and create new ones.

Coping with the Holiday Blues—those negative feelings from issues related to family, friends, work, unrealistic expectations of yourself and others.

- Try something new! Take a REAL vacation.
- Spend time with people who care about you.
- Volunteer your time to help others. Spending time with those in need can help you feel less isolated.
- If you are religious, take time to reflect on the spiritual significance of the holidays.
- Try to appreciate the good things you have now instead of focusing on the past.
- Stay active. Get out. Go for a walk. Window shop.
- Get help if you need it. Don't be embarrassed to ask for help any [time](#) of the year.

This holiday season, if you are more aware of the effects of stress on

your [body](#) and how to handle it, you will be more inclined to sleep in heavenly peace.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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