

Experts give tips for maintaining a healthy mind and keeping stress at bay during the holidays

December 13 2022



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The season of joy often also heralds a season of stress. There are

activities to attend, the house to clean, food to cook and, of course, gifts to purchase. These pressures can add to stress and affect your mental health.

Keith Stowell, chief medical officer at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, and Kelly Moore, director of the Center for Psychological Services at the Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, discuss some practical tips can help minimize holiday [stress](#).

What contributes to holiday stress for adults?

Stowell: As social obligations and activities increase, so do stress levels. Some people find interacting with [family members](#) or colleagues stressful, while others may be grieving the loss of a loved one. Additionally, financial stressors can be significant, especially if people are not in a position to purchase gifts for friends and loved ones when there is a seeming cultural obligation to gift giving at this time.

Moore: As we know, the impact of the pandemic is still being felt in many different ways. During the holidays, there may still be folks who are not able to spend time together due to illness and lingering fears about exposure to COVID-19, as well as the flu and respiratory syncytial virus outbreaks that are occurring.

What are some signs that you or someone you love is getting overwhelmed?

Stowell: Watch out for difficulty sleeping and changes in appetite, as well as emotional changes, such as sadness, anxiety, irritability and impatience. If you have existing [mental health](#) problems, are they getting worse?

Moore: If you have youth in your life that you are concerned about, watch for changes in behavior such as increased clinginess, frequent reassurance seeking and withdrawing from activities that they previously enjoyed or completed with ease. I also always encourage parents to take a look at their child's phone or tablet every once in a while to get a sense of the content they are consuming.

What can people do to alleviate stress?

Stowell: Tactics include [physical activity](#), sleep and meditation. Make time to do something that brings you joy. Connecting with others—whether it is via text, phone or in person—to share challenges is a great way to relieve stress. Remember to give yourself a break: You don't have to adhere to your diet 100% of the time or find the "perfect" gift for someone. If needed, therapy can also be helpful.

Moore: Stress is an inevitable part of life and so the first thing people can do is focus on their wellness, which is really about accepting that stress can be something we can get through with the right supports. Finding routine and predictability in your life is a great way to alleviate stress. Watching reruns of shows you enjoyed, having a cup of tea every day or creating a playlist of songs that bring you peace are just some ways to alleviate stress.

What is the best way to talk to loved ones about stress without stressing them out?

Stowell: If you're worried that someone you care about might be stressed or overwhelmed, you can have a discussion with them about your concerns. Approach the conversation in a nonjudgmental way and consider offering to help if you have the capacity to do so. For example, you can say, "I've noticed you have seemed overwhelmed lately with

everything going on for the holidays. Is there something I might be able to help with?" Suggest helping with tasks that can be social, like wrapping presents together or cooking for a family meal, as a companion activity will allow you both an opportunity to relieve stress together.

Moore: Don't be afraid to ask and when you do ask, point out what you are noticing that may help them to see that others do look out for them and care for them. If someone doesn't want to talk, let them know you are someone they can talk to when they are ready. And then, actually listen! You don't have to necessarily try to fix anything. Sometimes, all people want is for someone to sit and listen to them without judgment.

If you know someone in crisis, contact The New Jersey Hopeline, the state's 24/7 [peer support](#) and suicide prevention hotline (855-654-6735), which is operated by the Rutgers National Call Center at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care.

Provided by Rutgers University-New Brunswick

Citation: Experts give tips for maintaining a healthy mind and keeping stress at bay during the holidays (2022, December 13) retrieved 23 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-12-experts-healthy-mind-stress-bay.html>

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