

Trim your holiday stress this season: Experts offer tips

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The holidays are typically a happy whirlwind of gift-buying, house decorating, party planning and family gatherings, but all that work can also stress people out.

Luckily, experts at UT Southwestern Medical Center say there are things you can do to keep your stress levels under control and help make your [holidays](#) happy.

"Excess stress wears and tears on our bodies," said Rita Smith, a clinical social worker in the Clinical Heart and Vascular Center at UT Southwestern. "The best [holiday](#) gifts you can give yourself are equal doses of self-care and grace."

Start with realistic expectations, which will ease the pressure of trying to be perfect.

Remembering the holidays are all about gratitude will also help, said Sarah Woods, vice chair of research in UT Southwestern's Department of Family and Community Medicine.

"Think about what you're grateful for and put it in writing," Woods suggested in a university news release. "Focusing on the good can help you relax and cope with the not-so-good."

Another stressor during the holidays? Money.

Smith said it's best to make a spending plan for gifts and celebrations because holiday debts can be overwhelming. So, try to be practical yet creative with your gifting.

Then there's family relationships, which are sometimes strained.

Woods said stress linked to difficult [family relationships](#) can produce more cortisol. Elevated [cortisol levels](#) are linked to poor sleep, headaches, inflammation, reduced pain tolerance and shortness of breath.

The best way to prepare for that? Before visiting [family](#), discuss with your partner how much time you wish to spend with relatives and what conversations—politics, religion, parenting, education—should be off-limits, Woods said.

If you find yourself in the middle of a trying conversation with a relative despite that, try saying "I love you and respect you. Can we put this conversation on pause for now and talk about something else?" Woods recommended.

The holidays can be especially difficult if you are caring for a loved one who is ill or spending your first holidays alone after a divorce or the loss of a spouse, Smith added.

She recommended several ways to handle holiday [stress](#):

- Take time to exercise, get a massage, nap or read a book
- Try to eat healthy, even though holiday celebrations invite overindulgence
- Stay socially engaged. If you're sad because of a loss or disappointment, talk to your doctor, a friend or a counselor. There are many groups that provide support for dealing with divorce, grief or depression.
- Volunteer, because many people have additional needs during the holidays. Take a meal to a neighbor, go to a senior center and visit the residents or work with a food bank.

More information: The American Psychiatric Association has more on [handling holiday stress](#).

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