

De-stress your Holiday Season

By Dr. Tyteeka Reye

It doesn't take much to understand why stress levels increase during this time of the year. The traffic jams, aggressive shopping crowds, more debt, the pressure to add social events to an already packed schedule, entertaining the children and relatives....and all with a smile.

The unfortunate truth is that one of ten people in the US is over stressed. Add the craziness of the holiday season and that number increases dramatically. Scientists agree that stress causes actual chemical changes in the brain, and these changes can influence the state of your health.

Stress Health Risks:

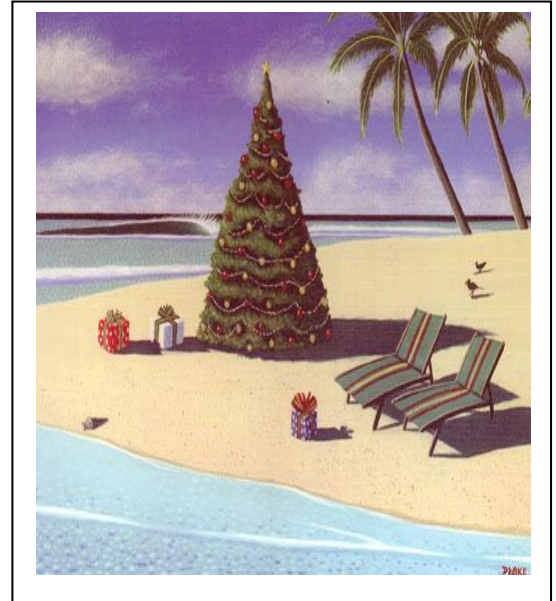
- Heart disease. High blood pressure, heart attacks, heart palpitations, and stroke may be stress related cardiovascular conditions.
- Changes in libido and various sexual dysfunctions.
- Fatigue, unexplained pain and headaches.
- Emotional disorders such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances.
- Causes gastrointestinal disorders such as ulcers, lower abdominal cramps, colitis, and irritable bowel syndrome.
- Increase prevalence of colds and infections due to lowered immune system responses.
- Stress can initiate dermatological conditions such as itchy skin and rashes.
- Stress is often a key factor when women experience either absence of menstruation or abnormal bleeding.
- Hormonal imbalances caused by stress may increase symptoms of fibroid tumors and endometriosis, as well as make pregnancy difficult to achieve for couples with fertility problems.

A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that Americans resort to unhealthy behaviors such as comfort eating, alcohol overindulgences, drug use, poor food choices, smoking and inactivity to help deal with stress. If allowed to continue for an extended period, these behaviors contribute to many illnesses.

Healthy Coping Mechanisms:

- Take time out. Holidays can leave you exhausted and taking time out is important. Try not to over schedule you holidays, give yourself adequate time for rest and relaxation - create the space and time for a simple time out to read quietly, go for a walk, or for a nap.
- Exercise. Exercise and stress are closely connected. Exercise reduces stress. Whether it is riding a bike, taking a walk or meditative yoga, physical exercise relieves stress by using up the by-products of the stress response. Exercising also gives you a natural boost of energy and elevates your mood through your body's natural feel good chemicals - endorphins.
- Get enough sleep. Holidays can involve partying, catching up with friends and a change in your routine. Sleep can be put on the back-burner. The more tired you get the more susceptible to stress you become. This makes getting enough sleep important for your holiday stress.
- Plan ahead. Nothing creates more stress than last minute shopping expeditions or holiday bookings. By planning ahead and setting aside time each day for yourself and quality time with your kids can reduce holiday stress.
- Have realistic expectations. The "everything must be right" attitude can create an unrealistic expectation and undue pressure for the perfect holiday. Counter this type of holiday stress by accepting that situations can be out of your control and that perfection is "idealistic" rather than "realistic".
- Flip your thinking. Your thoughts influence your feelings! If you have a negative outlook then you are more likely to be stressed and depressed. Some benefits of positive thinking include: reduced incidence of depression, lower stress levels, better coping mechanisms for stress, increased life span, and better health and psychological wellbeing.

Creating new, healthy habits won't happen overnight. Change one habit at a time, start small. Your progress will gain momentum and help you pursue more challenging stress management goals.



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Ways to promote your positive thinking and reduce stress

Given the importance of positive thinking on your stress levels, it is a good place to focus your attention when changing your stress response. There are a number of ways that you can promote optimism in your own life, and thereby increase happiness and build your skills for coping with stress.

Become aware your “self talk:” Self talk is the stream of endless chatter that runs through your head each day. Self talk can be an asset or your worst enemy. Negative thinking can occur when you criticize yourself after an error, when you are disparaging of yourself and anticipate failure or doubt your abilities.

Understand your negative thinking: By becoming aware of your negative thinking and the underlying cognitive distortions; you can develop strategies to turn them into constructive or positive thoughts.

Common Thinking Traps that Perpetuate Stress:

- **Black and White Thinking:** When you believe that there is no middle ground, you become very rigid in your thinking and lifestyle. This type of thinking can reduce self esteem or lead to perfectionism. One way to change this form of thinking is to relax and reframe. The first step is to realize and understand this form of thinking, and relax. Don't be too hard on yourself. When you recognize this behavior occurring try to reframe the situation and see it from another perspective. This exercise will relax this rigid way of thinking.
- **Overgeneralizations:** When a single negative situation such as a traffic jam elicits the response "This always happens to me". Such statements not only inflame negative feelings, they are almost never true.
- **Personalizing:** Individuals may view situations as pertaining to them which in reality has nothing to do with them. This often occurs in depression and social anxiety. A person may have low self-esteem and feel unimportant and yet paradoxically tend to view all sorts of negative events as revolving around them.

Try going through a whole day looking for positive events. This could include anything from your spouse being kind to you, getting a parking place easily, and feeling good for a few moments when you didn't expect to feel good, and so on. Nothing is too small in this exercise to be included. Keep an ongoing gratitude journal in which you record 5 things for which you can be grateful each day. Positive affirmations can help to reprogram your thinking so that you can promote automatic positive thinking. Positive affirmations reflect positive attitudes and thoughts and promote self confidence and personal control.

Gluten and Dairy Free Recipes:

Take the stress out of holiday cooking. This freezer friendly Indian spiced recipe works as a side dish, appetizer, or a healthy and quick fix meal when you're too busy to really cook.

Red Lentil Rice

- 1/2 cup chopped onion (1 medium)
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds, crushed
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1-1/3 cups uncooked basmati rice or long grain rice
- 2 14-ounce cans chicken broth
- 1/2 cup water
- 1 cup frozen peas
- 1/2 cup dry red lentils, rinsed and drained
- 1/4 cup snipped fresh mint
- 1 teaspoon garam masala

1 recipe Yogurt Raita (made the day before or day of)

1. In a 4-quart Dutch oven cook and stir onion, cumin seeds, salt, cayenne pepper, and garlic in hot oil over medium heat for 2 minutes; add rice. Cook and stir for 1 minute more. Carefully add broth and water. Bring to boiling; reduce heat. Simmer, covered, for 10 minutes.
2. Stir peas and lentils into onion mixture. Return to boiling; reduce heat. Simmer, covered, for 8 to 10 minutes more or until lentils are just tender. Remove Dutch oven from heat; stir in mint and garam masala.
3. **If Freezing:** Allow the dish to cool completely and transfer to freezer friendly packaging (I like dividing the dish into individual portions in Freezer Ziploc bags)
4. **To Serve:** Reheat either in a pot over a low flame stirring often, or in a covered dish in your microwave. Serve with Yogurt Raita. Makes 6 main-dish servings.

Yogurt Raita: In a medium bowl stir together one 6-ounce carton plain yogurt (traditional, coconut, goat, etc); 3/4 cup chopped, seeded cucumber (1 small); 1/2 cup chopped, seeded tomato (1 medium); 1 tablespoon snipped fresh mint; 1/8 teaspoon salt, and dash ground black pepper.