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Avoiding burnout

how to combat stress during the holidays.

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STRESS is nearly unavoidable during the holidays. The kneejerk reaction may be to rally through, but that won't make it go away, said Sarah Woods, vice chair of research at UT Southwestern Medical Center's department of family and community medicine in the United States.



“Rather than ignoring it or sort of pushing through, we can actually lessen the impact of that stress,” she said, “but we also might be able to improve some of what we’re stressed about.”

Here are tips on how to get through the holidays without burning yourself out.

How the body reacts to stress

The holidays pose challenges for many. Those of low socioeconomic status may feel the pressure to buy pricey toys and create happy memories for their children despite limited resources. Others may struggle to navigate difficult family relationships or wonder whether it’s worth attending holiday celebrations. For those who have lost a family member or close friend, grief may feel particularly acute.

Acute stress can trigger our “fight or flight” response, Woods said, leading to symptoms such as nausea, headaches, increased heart rate and jitters.

Our bodies release a hormone called cortisol when we’re stressed or scared. As stress accumulates over time, our bodies keep flooding with cortisol.

“The cumulative burden, that overload of the stress response,” Woods said, “is what really becomes the issue.”

Chronic stress can affect sleep, contribute to high blood pressure and disrupt metabolism.

Time to unplug

Before the holidays, Woods recommended thinking about where it feels most comfortable to spend them. Would a week at a sibling's place be easier than visiting the in-laws? What conversation topics should be off limits, and is there a way to set that boundary without provoking more tension?

For situations that may get contentious, Woods suggested finding an ally – be it a partner, friend or cousin – to check in with, and developing a signal for when it's time to duck out. Taking time to unplug and process emotions during the holidays can be helpful, said Conchita Andrijeski, a behavioural health counsellor at the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth.

She recommended taking quick walks or going to a favourite spot in the home to relax. Meditative activities like focusing on the flicker of a candle or counting the number of colours on the Christmas tree can help to calm down.

Andrijeski said mindfulness – being aware of how the body is reacting to what's happening – can help to relax.

“Practising mindfulness can be just a moment where you sit and think about what's happening in your body just taking a deep sigh, letting it go.”

For families coping with the loss of a loved one during the holidays, Andrijeski said it may help to bring them into the conversation. Consider discussing what they would have said if they were there or a favourite holiday memory shared with them.

If a close friend or family member is grieving, Woods recommended reaching out to say: I know this time of year can be difficult, and I'm thinking about you. Loneliness and loss can feel more intense during a time of year marked by merriment and joy.

After the holidays, reflect on how things went by writing feelings in a journal or debriefing with a trusted friend, Woods said. Connecting with people we feel safe with can soothe us and help counteract the body's stress response. – The Dallas Morning News/Tribune News Service