

How to Reduce Holiday Season Stress

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'Tis the season! – for out-of-town guests, navigating complicated family dynamics, holiday parties, frantically trying to get the house clean, presents, and budget stress. Anyone else panicking? Many Americans say that the winter season takes a toll on their mental health (APA, 2024). This time of year brings with it so much potential and in that very potential lies the perfect equation for holiday stress and overwhelm. The good news is, Americans also cite spending time with friends or family and eating good food as factors that help lift their moods during the winter months (APA, 2024). If we take proactive steps to plan for holiday stress, we can let go of the bad parts and benefit from the good parts to create a holiday season we actually enjoy! Here are a few ideas to help you reduce stress for your holidays:

1. **Remember that “imperfection is healthy and normal.”** The fantasy world of social media makes many feel like we are failing, no matter how hard we try and how much we do. Our homes, our cooking, and ourselves do not need to be perfect in order to have a beautiful holiday season. When things don't go “as planned” that is normal, too. Our gatherings should be as flexible and dynamic as the people who attend them (Johns Hopkins Medicine, n.d.)!

2. **Create healthy boundaries.** We can't do everything and furthermore, we don't need to. Healthy boundaries are self-care, and they apply to the number of events we attend, who we see, how much money we spend, and more (Martin, 2021). It's easy to worry that setting boundaries will create conflict (e.g., if we tell someone “no” they might get mad at us). This might be true in the short-term. However, setting boundaries will actually make for clearer expectations, better communication, and stronger relationships over time (Martin, 2021).
3. **Take care of your physical and mental health.** This is often a time of year where we fall into unhealthy eating habits and huddle on the couch to avoid the cold. Taking care of our physical health will benefit our mental health too. Many people find that getting outside, even in cold weather, helps them cope better with winter months (APA, 2024). As for diet, you don't have to cut out all holiday sweets but rather focus on balance. Just make sure you're consciously adding fresh fruits and vegetables every day and avoid too much snacking between meals to ensure you get a balanced diet. Remember to drink water throughout the day to stay hydrated.
4. **Seek help if you need it.** Basic “holiday stress” is something that comes and goes. It's based on the changes that happen with the season and the short-term demands we (and society) place on ourselves (Edwards, 2016). However, many Americans will also experience serious mental health concerns that would benefit from professional support this year. If you feel like you're having more than just “normal stress,” consider finding professional help. Here is a resource that can help you search providers based on your zip code and many providers now offer telehealth options: [samhsa.gov/find-help](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help).

Allow yourself to live in the moment this holiday season rather than reaching for perfectionism. Focusing on finding ways to experience less stress like setting healthy boundaries, taking care of both your mental and physical wellness, and reaching out for professional help when you need it can be helpful. This holiday season, you can focus on searching for small moments of joy, gratitude, and connectedness wherever you find them. If you'd like more ideas on how to decrease your holiday stress, check out the resources below.

Resources

How to manage the holidays – Extension HEART Team Tips. *YouTube.com*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdNx0uiB9VI>

Happy holidays are built on setting healthy limits. *PsychologyToday.com*. [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conquering-codependency/202112/healthy-holiday-boundaries](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conquering-codependency/202112/healthy-holiday-boundaries)

4 mindful tips to de-stress this holiday season. *HopkinsMedicine.org*. [hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/4-mindful-tips-to-destress-this-holiday-season](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/4-mindful-tips-to-destress-this-holiday-season)

10 tips to reduce stress and take care of yourself during the holidays. *Health.UCDavis.edu*. health.ucdavis.edu/blog/cultivating-health/10-tips-to-reduce-stress-and-take-care-of-yourself-during-the-holidays/2023/12

References

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American Psychiatric Association [APA]. (Nov 18, 2021). National report offers solutions to overcome the three major obstacles to rural mental health care. *Psychiatry.org*. <https://www.psychiatry.org/News-room/News-Releases/National-Report-Offers-Solutions-to-Overcome-the-T>

Edwards, S. (2016). Holiday stress and the brain. *Harvard.edu*. <https://hms.harvard.edu/news-events/publications-archive/brain/holiday-stress-brain>

Johns Hopkins Medicine. (n.d.). 4 mindful tips to de-stress this holiday season. *HopkinsMedicine.org*. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/4-mindful-tips-to-destress-this-holiday-season>

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