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Navigate Stress this Season with a Holiday Roadmap

'Tis the season for family get-togethers and Hallmark family movies, but for many employees the holiday season can be the most difficult time of the year—especially this year, with all the new challenges and limitations on in-person contact the pandemic brings. The need for emotional support, specifically for anxiety and depression, often quadruples from October through December each year.

There are a number of reasons why people struggle more emotionally during the holidays, beginning with the season itself. In many parts of the world, daylight is shorter and temperatures are colder this time of year, resulting in less time spent outdoors or doing physical activity.

In past years, the sheer busyness of the holidays was another common stress factor. Not only are there more errands to run (i.e. presents to buy, packing to do), but the calendar is usually full of concerts, parties, and family commitments. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic brings a whole new set of concerns, such as worries about your or a loved one's health, increased stress about whether or not to travel, or grief at missing the usual in-person holiday festivities.

Anxiety over finances is also common during the holidays. The push to buy and spend begins weeks before Black Friday and lasts all season long. You may feel bad for spending too much and going overboard or worry that you haven't spent enough and fear disappointing people.

For those grieving a personal loss, the season is particularly difficult. Whether someone is grieving the absence of a family member who has passed or one that is just no longer present in their lives, or they are experiencing grief from not being able to meet with loved ones this year, thinking of families celebrating together can trigger painful emotions.

According to Shannon LaRance, Licensed Clinical Social Worker Associate (LCSWA) and a clinical counselor with Workplace Options, the holiday season sets up unrealistic expectations, leaving many people feeling overwhelmed, disappointed, and often lonely. "People put a lot of pressure on themselves to create picture-perfect holiday memories," shares Shannon. "But the expectations are impossible to live up to."

When Shannon is providing support to someone struggling with anxiety due to the holidays, she encourages them to develop their own personal roadmap for the season. "A holiday roadmap encourages people to think through their schedule and decide in advance what their holiday will look like," shares Sharon.

Below are five tips that Shannon suggests for developing a healthy, holiday roadmap.

1. Set realistic expectations for your time and energy.

By the end of the holidays people are exhausted, because they have simply tried to do too much. Decide in advance what events you really want to attend (if any), and politely decline the others. Give yourself the freedom to say no without guilt. For "pandemic-safe" holiday plans, get creative and come up with alternative traditions to your usual events: Set up virtual meetups, send gifts in the mail, or limit your gathering to a small social bubble where everyone has taken thorough precautions. Don't feel bad if you aren't seeing anyone: Health and safety are the most important things, and this situation is temporary.

2. Set realistic expectations for your finances.

Decide on a budget that is reasonable. Don't get roped into the commercialism of the season. It's about thoughtful, meaningful gifts, not the price tag. Make homemade presents, like recipes, photo albums, or other crafts.

3. Surround yourself with healthy people.

Make an effort to spend time with people who encourage and support you, not only in-person but also via phone and social media. Avoid toxic people, even if that means declining some holiday invitations or limiting virtual communication with certain individuals or groups. If you are dealing with grief or addiction, consider joining a support group so you can communicate with people sharing similar struggles; most organizations have set up special online, telephone, and email support systems.

4. Take care of yourself physically.

Don't sacrifice sleep in an effort to get things done. Instead, recognize that you need rest to be able to recharge. Aim to eat healthy, and try to stock your fridge with nutritious options (and fewer sugary snacks). Avoid excessive consumption of alcohol.

5. Take care of yourself emotionally.

Schedule quiet time for yourself daily to unplug and unwind. During this time, you may choose to walk, journal, meditate, or practice mindfulness.

Shannon adds that ultimately you get to choose what kind of holiday season you want, so make it your own!

Source: Workplace Options. (Revised 2020, December 10 [Ed.]). Navigate stress this season with holiday roadmap (C. Gregg-Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Author. Retrieved December 10, 2020, from <https://www.workplaceoptions.com>

Stress Hardiness

Some individuals are able to deal and cope with stress better than others! Hardiness is the ability to deal effectively with stress. People can become tougher and stress-hardy through encountering stress, coping, and learning from experiences!

Everyone can learn to enhance stress-hardiness skills! Three Cs are the components of hardiness:

Control

Challenge

Commitment

How to Improve Stress Toughness

Control

- Believe that you have control over your life.
- You can manage any problem that you face.
- Your outlook is positive!
- Feeling in control helps to decrease stress.

Challenge

- View life as a challenge.
- Do not see it as a threat or an endless group of problems.
- Seek and take on challenges.
- Believe that you will learn from challenging experiences!

Commitment

- Have a mission.
- Be committed to what you do.
- Believe that what you're doing is meaningful, purposeful, and right!

Ways to Improve Stress Hardiness

- Respond appropriately to change.
- Assess how you react to changes and to stress.
- Remember that not all types of change are negative!
- Downplay and minimize the effects of change through exploring the consequences of change.
- Change your self-talk!
- Watch and monitor what you say to yourself.
- Write your thoughts down. Often this reveals them to be illogical, incorrect, or harmful.
- Modify interpretation and the meaning of self-talk so that it is not negative.
- Switch your inner voice from “I can’t” to “I can handle it!”

Face tough situations, and handle the distress. Practice the coping skills of healthy responses to stress, positive self-talk, and relaxation strategies. View the situation as a challenge, and believe that it will be okay. See yourself as stress-hardy!

Source: U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center. (n.d.). Stress hardiness [PPT]. Retrieved August 6, 2021, from <https://www.powershow.com>

Helpful Hints for Healthy Holiday Eating

It’s that time of year again. Holiday parties and family gatherings can present a special challenge when it comes to eating healthily—especially for people who are trying to prevent or control diabetes. The key to a diabetes friendly gathering is having a variety of healthy food selections, and this doesn’t mean that you’ll have to completely sacrifice all of your favorites!

The National Diabetes Education Program (NDEP) has a few tips to help you stay healthy and enjoy the holidays:

- **Eat a healthy snack before leaving home.** This will reduce the risk of overeating at the party.
- **Go to the party with a plan.** Check out the buffet first, and then decide what and how much you will eat. The foods you select should fit into your meal plan.
- **Bring a dish.** Contribute your favorite healthy dish to the holiday buffet.
- **Savor every bite.** Eating slowly reduces your chances of eating too much.
- **Drink water.** Water is a healthy, no-calorie beverage (compared to 1 cup of eggnog that has 342 calories!).
- **Trim the fat from the meat.** Each tablespoon of fat you trim off contains 100 calories.
- **Be the life of the party.** Stay active by focusing on party activities instead of the buffet table.

If you’re throwing the party, here are a few additional ways to be a healthy holiday host:

- **Offer a variety of low-fat, high-fiber foods.** There are lots of healthier options; consider fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, grilled or broiled lean meats, fish, turkey, and chicken without the skin. Reduce the use of mayonnaise, oil, and butter. Increase fiber with whole-grain breads, peas, and beans.
- **Serve healthy alternatives to traditional holiday dishes.** Transform traditionally high-fat and high-calorie foods into low-fat, healthier versions. You can use nonfat or 1% milk instead of whole milk or cream. Try to bake or broil foods when possible instead of frying. Skip cream cheese and try low-fat cottage cheese or plain yogurt.
- **Be a support system for your family members and friends.** If you see them slipping, keep encouraging them to eat healthily during the holiday season, and throughout the year.

Source: National Diabetes Education Program. (Revised 2016, June 7 [Ed.]). Helpful hints for healthy holiday eating (B. Schuette, Ed.). Retrieved June 7, 2016, from http://www.ndep.nih.gov/media/Healthy_Holiday_Eating.pdf

The Sandwich Years (Part 2): Managing Stress

This article focuses on the challenges faced by those in the sandwich generation. The sandwich generation refers to working adults between the ages of 40 and 60 who are raising a family, as well as caring for aging parents. This article offers practical ways to deal with stress.

Susan Daniel, a National Board Certified Health and Wellness Coach (NBC-HWC) at Workplace Options, believes it is critical that adults in the sandwich generation take a proactive approach to dealing with stress. Knowing this can be a prolonged season of challenging circumstances, she encourages caregivers to work on managing stress before it hits a tipping point.

Susan and her coworker Meribeth Aldridge, an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC), have put together the following suggestions to counter stress:

- **Expand your knowledge of stress reduction.** Take a yoga class, explore a mindfulness app, listen to a podcast on handling stress, or pick up a book to enhance your skills on addressing various situations in your life.
- **Learn what stress-relieving techniques work well for you.** Do some experimentation. Try different time lengths, methods (e.g. self-guided or guided), and approaches. Examples of different approaches include gratitude, relaxation, stepping back and taking stock, or visualization.
- **Practice positivity.** It is easy to get lost in stressful thoughts soon after waking. Begin the day with positive affirmations, and get clear on how you want to feel. Identify and reduce negative stimuli in your life, such as pessimistic people, certain forms of media, and bad habits. If you are not feeling positive, “fake it till you make it.” Smiling can be a great mood booster!
- **Find ways in your daily routine to “take a moment.”** Go for a short walk, take a couple of deep breaths, or close your eyes and count back from 10. Small approaches such as these can improve your outlook, calm you down, and reset your mind.
- **Train your brain by practicing stress-release techniques on a regular basis.** Practicing on a regular basis will help you access those techniques “in the moment.”
- **Do not create stress by setting unattainable goals.** Instead, set SMART goals, which can be more effective than general goals and offer clarity and guidance for your intentions. A SMART goal is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound. For example, “I will swim two days a week at the community pool after work on Mondays and Wednesdays,” in place of “I will be more active.” SMART goals can be applied to many different areas of your life, such as work, exercise, and nutrition.
- **Talk to someone about your stressors.** While a friend may not be able to offer an immediate answer to assist you in your situation, talking to another person about your stresses can remind you that you are not alone and that others may be facing the same circumstances. Talking to someone about your stress can even help you look at situations from a new perspective or think more logically about them, as you express your concerns aloud instead of only fuming internally.

According to Andrew Maher, accredited Member of the National Association for Professional Counselling & Psychotherapy (MNAPCP) in Ireland (<https://www.napcp.ie>) and clinical team lead at Workplace Options’ Dublin office, working with a counselor can be very advantageous in managing stress. “A counselor can listen to the client’s self-talk and the expectations they may be placing on themselves, using words like ‘should’ and ‘must’, which adds an extra layer on stress,” explains Andrew. “Working with a counselor can help one learn to be more compassionate and forgiving towards oneself and eliminate some of the unrealistic expectations driving the feelings of stress.”

Source: Workplace Options. (2019). *The sandwich years part II – Managing stress*. Raleigh: Author. Retrieved December 9, 2020, from <https://www.workplaceoptions.com>