

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Holiday Season Coping Strategies | December 2019



"Telling others when you are struggling to meet their expectations will help defuse your anxiety and make it more possible to relax."

Holiday Season Coping Strategies

In the winter, and especially during the holiday season, many people feel tired, anxious or depressed when they are normally more upbeat.

When days are shorter, lack of sunlight affects your body chemistry and may cause low moods and sleepiness. Meanwhile, mild anxiety is a normal reaction to stressful situations and pressure to meet expectations; your body is telling you to stay alert and protect yourself. Some people dread social situations or become preoccupied with their problems.

Managing Stress

An American Psychological Association survey identified time constraints, financial concerns, social and family gatherings, and commercialism as common holiday season stressors. Here are 10 ways to help prevent and manage related stress:

1. Keep indoor environments bright.
2. Dress warmly and spend time outdoors.
3. Plan ahead and do not overcommit yourself.
4. Start or maintain a consistent exercise routine.
5. Pick nutritious foods to balance your diet.
6. Limit alcohol consumption; it's a depressant.
7. Follow a consistent schedule for quality sleep.
8. Occupy your mind with activities you enjoy.
9. Breathe; practice yoga and/or meditation.
10. Create a spending budget and stick to it.

Overcoming Social Anxiety

Shyness or feeling uncomfortable in social situations is not the same as social anxiety disorder, a type of phobia characterized by extreme self-consciousness and fear of being negatively judged or rejected.

In addition to practicing stress management techniques, when you feel anxious about attending a social function:

- Remember that most people are wondering what you think of them, not vice versa.
- Stick to non-controversial topics; choose subjects you are comfortable discussing.
- Don't depend on alcohol or drugs to help you relax and engage with others.
- Be selective about events you attend; don't feel obligated to accept every invitation.

Consult a mental health professional if you consistently avoid social encounters, feel extremely self-conscious or tongue-tied, or have symptoms such as rapid heart rate, nausea, sweating, trembling or stiffness in social situations. Social anxiety disorder is generally treated with talk therapy, medication or both.



Clarifying Expectations

If you can't seem to satisfy others and please yourself, unrealistic expectations or a core belief that you are not enough may be root causes. Depression, fear, negative self-talk, social isolation and eating disorders are examples of unhealthy responses to unmet expectations. To set yourself up for success:

- **Clarify and agree** on expectations. Do expected behaviors reduce or create stress?
- **Be realistic** about what can be accomplished. No one can be all things to all people.
- **Be proactive.** Plan a fun activity suitable for social settings. Ask for help when you need it.
- **Dial it down.** Focus on quality time. Redefine traditions that no longer work for you.
- **Relax.** Listen to music, read, watch a movie or putter around. Go outdoors. Play games.

Stopping Rumination

Dwelling on problems without finding solutions is called rumination. This condition may become more acute when making New Year's resolutions to correct perceived inadequacies. Rumination is a self-defeating behavior associated with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), negative coping styles, self-criticism, pessimism, compulsion and substance use. If you have rumination tendencies:

- Keep busy; find healthy ways to occupy your mind.
- Be in the present moment and focus on your breath.
- Diversify your interests and sense of identity.
- Resolve or cross one problem off your worry list.

Experts say once you recognize rumination doesn't produce solutions, it's easier to stop. If you can't seem to break the rumination-depression cycle, get professional help.

Anxiety and depression are treatable. Seek care for persistent signs and symptoms such as:

- *Suicidal thoughts*
- *Feeling nervous, restless or irritable*
- *Rapid heart rate/breathing, sweating, trembling*
- *Weakness or exhaustion*
- *Forgetfulness*
- *Difficulty concentrating*
- *Trouble sleeping*
- *Sad or empty mood*
- *Loss of interest in activities*