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10 Ways to Keep Holiday Stress, Celebrations From Undoing Your Healthy Habits



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By Nick Tate | Thursday, 24 Dec 2015 08:02 PM

Good food, fun, and stress increase in equal measure over the winter holidays, which can make it hard to keep up with nutrition, exercise, and other healthy lifestyle habits.

But with a little planning — based on solid advice from some of the nation's top wellness experts — you can still indulge in the joys of Christmas, New Year's, and other holidays, without sacrificing your mental or physical health.

“The holidays can be a difficult time of year to remain on track with nutrition and healthy lifestyle habits,” notes Dr. Keith Kantor, a nationally known wellness and natural-food advocate.

He tells Newsmax Health a handful of strategies are key to staying healthy over the holidays — such as remaining physically active, getting plenty of rest, and not overdoing it on sweets and alcohol.

Dr. Donna L. Hamilton, author of “Wellness Your Way: The Short and Sweet Guide to Creating Your Custom Plan for a Happier, Healthier Life,” adds that stress is as much a part of the winter holidays as shopping, baking, entertaining, and traveling — not to mention “dealing with eccentric family members who arrive ready to renew decades-old arguments.”

Managing stress is key to maintaining your health and holiday spirit up, she tells Newsmax Health.

“Stress is pervasive,” Dr. Hamilton says, noting holiday stress is just like any other variety. “Stress is a fact of life. And stress isn’t even always bad. Some people need a certain amount of stress to function optimally.”

Her advice for managing it: Try to keep perspective and maintain an “attitude of gratitude.”

For people with certain health conditions — such as arthritis and chronic pain — the holidays pose particular challenges and can even trigger flare-ups of symptoms, notes Dr. Jacob Teitelbaum, a wellness expert and author of “The Fatigue and Fibromyalgia Solution.”

That makes the management of stress and other difficulties particularly important for such individuals.

“While you may not be able to totally avoid stress, you can reduce your stress levels and your odds of painful episodes by following a few simple rules,” he tells Newsmax Health. Among them: make time to exercise, stick to a healthy diet, and visit with “the people who make you feel good,” he says.

Beyond these general guidelines, here are 10 specific tips for a happy and healthy holiday season — courtesy of Drs. Teitelbaum, Hamilton, and Kantor.

No. 1: Sleep. Aim for at least 7 hours of sleep per night. Lack of sleep makes it more difficult to deal with the stressful situations you might face through the holidays.

No. 2: Stay active. Regular gym trips may not be a realistic option, so compensate with small bursts of exercise throughout the day. Take a quick walk after a holiday meal, or do pushups, planks, and squats. Dancing and laughing both burn calories and help lift your mood, too, Dr. Hamilton notes.

No. 3: Limit certain foods. Don’t deny yourself a few favorite holiday treats, but go easy on the sweets, alcohol, caffeinated drinks, and processed foods. This is particularly important for those with eating or drinking disorders, diabetes, celiac disease, and other conditions.

No. 4: Boost your nutrition. Be sure to consume recommended nutrients daily — including at least five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables daily. Proper nourishment not only boosts your immune system, but can also reduce your cravings for sugar and junk food.

No. 5: Consider supplements. Take a daily multi-vitamin or other supplements to compensate for changes in your regular diet, due to holiday-related travel and alterations in regular schedules.

No. 6: Practice calm. Make time to relax for at least a few minutes during the day. Take a few deep, relaxing breaths, listen to favorite songs, or practice meditation, yoga, or other mind-calming activities.

No. 7: Adjust expectations. Don't shoot for the perfect Norman Rockwell-esque holiday or you're likely to be disappointed and anxious. Instead, expect the expected — flights may be delayed, a relative may get sick, weather may take a turn, certain plans will be changed suddenly — and you'll be better equipped to manage.

No. 8: Be grateful. Research shows that expressing gratitude and reflecting on the positives in life — your health, family, friends, a rewarding career — can all help improve mood, increase energy levels, and relieve stress.

No. 9: Make time for yourself. Many people volunteer their time to do something for others during the holiday season, but it's important to also pay attention to your own physical and mental needs — as well as spend as much time as possible engaging in activities that bring you joy. "You can't give from an empty cup," Dr. Hamilton says.

No. 10: Just say no — to stress. One way to manage stress is not to overschedule yourself. If you feel like you cannot possibly fit one more thing into your calendar and someone asks to add something to your plans, "just say no," Dr. Teitelbaum advises. Instead commit to what you can handle and enjoy, and maximize the time you spend celebrating with the people who enrich your life and make you laugh.

"In general, I suggest you decide to say yes or no based on how you feel, more than based on a sense of guilt," he recommends. "So if going to Aunt Agnes's Ugly Holiday Sweater Party makes you feel awful every year, politely bow out, stay home and plug in your favorite holiday classics with the ones you love to be with!"