



Enjoying the Holiday Season

Decrease stress and find bliss during the holidays this year.

For some people, the time between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day is the highlight of their year. They look forward to cooking turkeys, buying presents, singing carols and spreading the spirit of the holidays to everyone they meet.

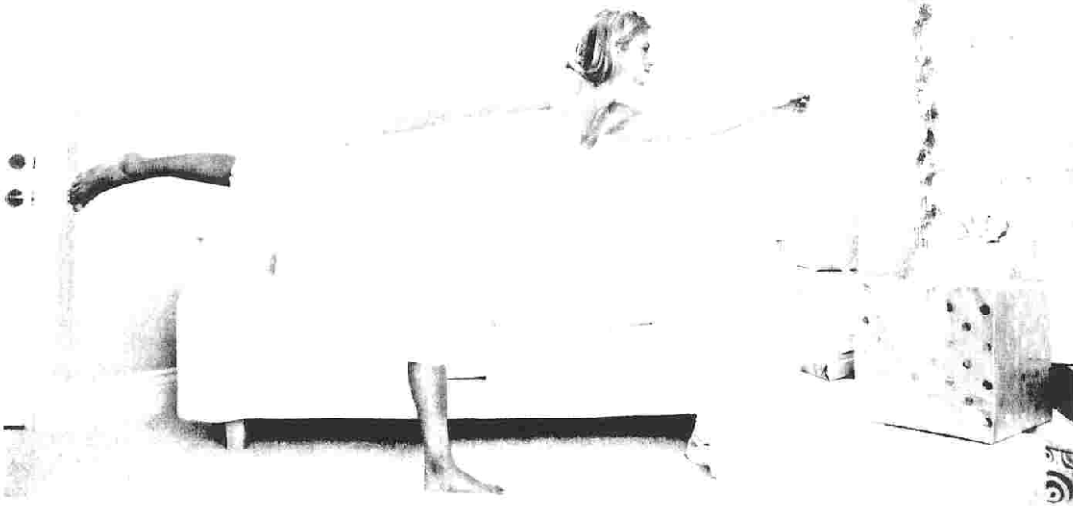
Then there are the rest of us. We're not exactly Scrooges, but for us, celebrating the holidays can be a monumental effort often filled with stress. If the holidays make you say "oh no" rather than "ho ho," consider these suggestions for eliminating stress and tapping into the pleasure of the season.

ing psychologist, mind-body wellness expert and certified tai chi chuan instructor in Escondido, California. "You want to pace yourself," he explains. "Organize your time, and prioritize the important activities. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do."

Think about what you really delight in during the holidays. Every year Kate Larsen, executive coach of Winning LifeStyles Inc., in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, thinks about what she—or her family—enjoyed the previous holi-

coming few weeks. If I need to purchase tickets, make reservations or order gifts, I simply write down all the contact phone numbers or e-mail addresses I will need. Then, when I have a few minutes, I'm ready to knock something off my to-do list."

Also remember what you *don't* want to repeat from the previous holiday season. Larsen said yes to too many weekend commitments one year, and they ended up feeling like drudgery. "As a family, we determined that two events per weekend



Make Conscious Choices

Setting reasonable expectations is key to preventing holiday stress, says Larry Cammarata, PhD, a clinical and consult

day season. "I remember good ideas or events I want to do for the coming holidays," she says. "Then I take that Thanksgiving weekend to plan the up

from Friday-Sunday would be our commitment limit," she says. "That has worked well for years: yes, we miss some fun things, but we're not biting each

other's heads off by New Year's Day, because we've created that intentional space. It's okay to say no and disappoint people if your motive is to save your sanity and take better care of your immediate family."

Plan in Advance

Careful scheduling and starting holiday chores ahead of time can help you better savor December events. "In September or October, I list all the things that I need to accomplish for the holidays, and when I need to get them done," explains Mary E. Miriani, a personal trainer at Reality Fitness Inc., in Naperville, Illinois. "Having them on paper allows me to become aware of what is truly a priority and what is not. I ask myself what I would miss if I did not do [a task]. Taking only the priority items, I schedule these things on my calendar, including my daily workout, which is a priority."

"Meditate, listen to music or just relax without feeling guilty about not 'doing.'"

Once things are written into my calendar, I can let them go and not think about them all the time. Treating holiday chores like a normal part of life helps me keep my serenity throughout the season."

You may also want to schedule a trip or time off if you are a personal trainer with many clients away during the holidays. "Plan a vacation as soon as possible, and do it on your terms," says Stephen Holt, 2003 ACE Personal Trainer of the Year and team leader of Stephen Holt Fitness Consulting LLC in Lutherville, Maryland. "Don't feel obligated to stick around for the handful of clients who won't be away."

Focus on Self-Care

Before the whirlwind of the season starts, recommit to a workable routine of self-care to ward off stress, says Cammarata.

Exercise. "Take time to do what you normally do to manage stress, such as weight training, aerobics, meditation, yoga, tai chi, Pilates, etc.," says Cammarata. "Stay [dedicated] to this routine before and during the holidays."

"Take time out for simply 'being,'" suggests Cammarata.

Miriani puts her workouts at the top of her holiday list. "The positive music playlist [I have created] changes a little to include a 'peace on earth' theme," she says. "I do not restrict myself to only holiday music, but anything that fits that theme. After working out to this music, I find that I cannot help but be calm and joyful."

If you don't have as much time to exercise as you usually do, consider a reduced workout schedule, suggests Larsen. "This is better than no exercise at all," she says. "The physical release of body and mind with exercise has a ripple effect that may allow you to let go and relax more through the holidays."

Sleep. Cammarata recommends committing to getting a full night's sleep

every night. "Regulate your waking and sleeping times, and cut down on late night TV and computer use. Also, [know that] alcohol can increase feelings of depression and interfere with the quality of your sleep."

Eating. Larsen advises being vigilant about the foods and drinks you consume. "Holiday foods will zap your energy and cause your blood sugar (and mood) to wave up and down," she says. "Keep asking yourself whether a 'fun' food is worth the impact on your body and soul."

Miriani uses a "get real" approach for food at holiday parties. She prepares for them by giving herself "permission to be 'off-duty' and enjoy some of my favorite foods and drink," she says. "As fitness professionals we are held to a higher standard regarding eating, and it is hugely stressful when people expect us to only eat carrot sticks and always forego dessert. I like to stay real by keeping in mind that I eat well most of the time, and my exercise routine



mental techniques

When stress starts to mount during the holidays, Kate Larsen, Executive Coach of Winning LifeStyles Inc., in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, suggests asking yourself, "Is this what I want the holiday season to look like? Is this what I want my family/friends to remember?" If yes, adjust your expectations so you

do the best you can, and let go of doing things perfectly. If not, release the expectations to do all or some things, and get okay with it in your mind. Unplug emotionally for a bit. Take a walk. Turn on quiet music, and calm your heart, mind and soul."

Mary E. Miriani, a personal trainer at Reality Fitness Inc., in

Naperville, Illinois, recommends using meditation. "I start by concentrating on my breathing and letting the thoughts flow through," she says. "I then create a picture of a serene place, see myself there and absorb the peace from that place into my body, like a sponge. I concentrate on this until I feel peaceful."

is always in place. Furthermore, I do not judge my friends and relatives who are enjoying some holiday treats."

Give to Others

Planning some volunteer time for the holiday season may also reduce stress. "I schedule 1 hour a week in December, which helps me put the craziness in perspective and makes me face gratitude head-on," says Lawrence Biscontini, MA, international spa consultant and movement specialist in Puerto Rico, New York

City and Greece. "I find such opportunities by asking at churches and synagogues and by using Google. I also use www.salvationarmyusa.org and www.unitedway.org for inspirational ways to make a difference."

Make Time for You

If, despite your best measures, you find yourself getting stressed in the midst of the holiday season, try these tips.

Relax. "Take time out for simply 'being,'" suggests Cammarata. "Meditate, listen to music or just relax without feeling guilty

about not 'doing.' Hiking in a beautiful natural setting such as the mountains or a beach can also help you maintain a relaxed rhythm in the midst of the holiday flurry."

Do Something Fun. Biscontini treats himself by "taking a wellness class experience from someone new at a fitness or yoga studio. I also schedule mid-week treats like massages, and I volunteer to walk dogs for others just to get out and bond with a furry animal. If I'm really busy, I at least plan my walking trips by pet-shop windows where, during the holidays, the stores have fluffy pups full of love that remind me how open true love is supposed to be and how freely it is offered! At a commercial time of year, that comes in handy."

Cammarata recommends destressing by treating yourself to a comedy movie, maybe even something beyond your normal tolerance for silliness.

Connect With People. Holidays can sometimes trigger feelings of sadness and loneliness, says Cammarata. In addition to focusing on making the most of the present and not comparing this year to past holidays, Cammarata recommends talking to a supportive friend or family member if stress hits. "Spend time with the most important people in your life, especially those who offer you emotional support, caring and a good sense of humor," he says.

Joy Is the Answer

Miriani offers her sure-fire way to ward off stress and make the most of the holidays. "I try not to get all caught up in the externals of the holiday season and to remember that the holidays are about giving and receiving joy," she says. "As long as I smile at people and offer help when I can, I am giving joy. Joy is always returned in the gratitude people feel. The power to enjoy the holidays resides in me and not in decorations, gifts or holiday meals. It is always with me whenever I choose to bring it up into my consciousness. Staying in the present does this, and this inner joy is the holiday spirit." ■

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