

SELF-HELP

Unwind from holiday stress

By Helene Stoller, Psy.D

CONTRIBUTOR

Now that the holidays are over, and life has returned to more normal proportions, I hope that each of you has the time to pause and reflect on how much stress you have felt in your daily life during the past year.



Helene Stoller

You might be among the 33 percent of Americans reporting extreme levels of stress in the American Psychological Association's 2007 "Stress in America" poll. Although low to moderate levels of stress can motivate and challenge an individual, extreme stress takes both an emotional and physical toll in terms of increased fatigue, heart disease, obesity, depression and burnout.

The American Psychological Association recently published a Stress Tip Sheet, offering practical advice on managing stress. The following suggestions are excerpted from that publication, which can be found at www.apa-helpcenter.org/articles:

Understand how you experience stress. How do you know when you are stressed? How do your thoughts, feelings, or behavior differ from times when you do not experience stress?

My behavior becomes more disorganized, and I flit from one task to another without accomplishing any of them. I also feel a knot in my stomach from anxiety, and my back and shoulders feel tense.

Other people may have difficulty making decisions, feel angry, irritable, or out of control, or experience headaches or fatigue.

Identify your sources of stress — children, family, health, work, finances, rela-

tionships, or something else?

Recognize how you deal with stress. Do you use unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking, drinking excessive alcohol, overeating or overspending to cope with stress?

Find healthy ways to manage stress. Choose to change an unhealthy stress-related behavior to a healthy one.

Healthy stress-reducing activities include meditation, exercise, and talking things over with family or friends.

Old, unhealthy habits may be deeply ingrained and take persistence to change, so don't let yourself get discouraged by occasional setbacks.

Take care of yourself. Get eight hours of sleep each night, eat three nutritious meals plus snacks each day, drink lots of water and engage in regular physical activity, such as walking, yoga, going to the gym or playing sports.

Physical activity enhances both physical and mental health, through the

release of endorphins, the body's natural pain killer and mood enhancer. Take regular vacations or other breaks from work.

Talking with family and friends can, at worst, help us feel supported and understood, and, at best shed needed light on problems that create stress for us, resulting in our improved ability to manage stress.

No matter how frantic life gets, it is essential to make time for yourself. Even simple things like reading a good book or listening to your favorite music help to calm, soothe, and lighten the load for a while.

If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress even after following these suggestions, I encourage you to consult with a mental health professional.

A toast to lives of well-managed, low to moderate stress!

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