

Dreaming of a Stress-Free Holiday Season

By Lauren Schneider, B.S., and Robert Wickersham, B.A.

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” This common seasonal sentiment sets the stage for added pressure during the holidays. From gifts to cooking to being subjected to the banter of family members, the holidays are often more stressful than joyful. Many people even approach the holiday season with dread. Although we look forward to seeing friends and relatives, the demands of organizing events, planning dinners, buying gifts, navigating travel, and entertaining guests pile more responsibilities onto our busy daily lives.

For some people, the holidays also rekindle complicated emotions, evoke feelings of loneliness, or bring up memories of lost loved ones. Traveling to your childhood home can generate emotions such as joy or despair, and seeing family members can be anxiety-provoking as well when there are unresolved conflicts. With that in mind, it is helpful to reflect on the feelings we experience during the holiday season. You may be nervous about tackling grandma’s classic pumpkin pie recipe. Will it turn out right? Will it taste as wonderful as when she makes it? You also may feel disappointed when you are not able to purchase this year’s hot new toy for your grandchild. It is important to acknowledge and experience these emotions rather than push them aside.

The media and those around us contribute to the pressure to make the holidays perfect in every conceivable way. Oftentimes, the holidays push finances to the limit as we strive to buy just the right gifts for those we love. In the end, however, we must reflect on what is really important: spending time with family and friends.

With the holidays comes great food! It is certainly tempting to go back for seconds of Aunt Betsy’s famous turkey stuffing, but maintaining your health during the holiday season is an important factor in self-care. It is easy to become caught up in the holiday hustle and bustle and lose sight of self-care. Many people have the misconception that self-care is selfish, but that is not the case. Embracing self-care activities helps you maintain health and wellness, allowing you to better manage stress and providing you with more energy for holiday commitments. How will you make those delicious potato latkes if you are feeling sick and run down? Whether it’s enjoying a cup of hot chocolate or relaxing in front of the fire, do not forget to make time for yourself.

The keys to stress reduction during the holidays are (1) plan ahead, (2) breathe, (3) embrace self-care (listen to your body and mind), (4) create new traditions, and (5) get enough sleep. Planning ahead can include arranging travel plans, financial budgeting, and identifying emotional triggers. Breathing means focusing on the process: Taking deep breaths helps relax your body and mind. Know your limit when it comes to activities and obligations. Don’t bite off more than you can chew (and that includes the turkey). Saying no is okay! Create new traditions. Trying to celebrate the holidays the same way you have for 20 years can be stressful and overwhelming. Be mindful of who is applying holiday pressure and creating the rules. For

example, what would happen if you didn't travel to Cousin Louie's as per tradition? Would it be the end of the world to forgo baking and decorating the family sugar cookies? We often create rules for ourselves, and we forget that we can control whether or not to follow them.

Finally, be sure to get enough sleep. Research shows that sleep is a biological need as important as drinking water. Without it you can feel irritable, paranoid, or depressed; struggle to learn new information or make mistakes; crave high-calorie foods and struggle with impulse control (especially critical when faced with so many Christmas cookies); and develop health problems. The National Sleep Foundation recommends 7-8 hours of sleep per night for older adults to protect their health, mood, and safety. To improve your sleep, have a consistent bedtime routine and consider removing electronics like TVs, cell phones, and computers from your room (or at least turn them off), as exposure to the blue light from these devices disturbs your ability to produce the sleep-inducing hormone, melatonin, and disrupts your body's circadian rhythms. Sleeping *au naturel* also can stimulate deeper and more uninterrupted sleep and improve one's immune system.

In all the holiday hubbub, try not to forget the spirit of the season. And remember that if you are experiencing distress beyond your capacity, it may help to reach out to a mental health professional. Have a mindful and merry holiday season!

Lauren Schneider and Robert Wickersham are UCCS clinical psychology doctoral students and trainees at the UCCS Aging Center. For more information, contact Lauren at lschnei3@uccs.edu or Robert at rwickers@uccs.edu or call the Aging Center at 719-255-8002.