

# Ten Tips on Coping with Stress and Anxiety

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Anxiety is a signal our mind and body gives us that danger is near. The danger may come from internal or external sources. We feel the press of living through the stresses we experience. Stress is cumulative, as it draws upon our personal and physical resources. Different people have individual tolerances for higher-than-normal levels of stress and anxiety. When feeling over-burdened, excessive stress and anxiety can lead to lowered self-esteem and depression. In such a situation, the goal of psychotherapy is to validate your emotional experience, adjust the negative self-assessment engendered by emotional overload, and help you find the path of support and positive developmental change. Often, anxiety and stress are heightened by being caught between untenable choices in life, or between people we love (or even, sometimes, fear). These problems can be explored and understood in psychotherapy.

Below are some tips about what many have found to be at least temporarily useful coping skills for living with stress and anxiety. They are not foolproof. If you are feeling very distressed and your life is suffering, there is no substitute to talking with a professional.

1. Be flexible. Know what you can change and what you can't, go with the flow, be open to changes.
2. Laugh more. Watch a funny movie, tell a joke, read the comics.
3. Breathe slowly, deeply, and well. Relaxation begins with slow, deep breathing from your diaphragm.
4. Learn to say "no". It's hard to say no sometimes, but recognize you can't do everything, pace yourself.
5. Go ahead and make mistakes. No one's perfect. The only way we really learn is from our mistakes. Accept them as the natural process of growing in wisdom.
6. Play... with a lover, a friend, a child, a pet. Having fun is the natural way of lowering the body's stress hormones. Stress tenses, play loosens.
7. Get active. Exercise brings out the body's endorphins, natural pain-killers and pleasure-producing substances produced inside every one of us.
8. Eat well and avoid stimulants. A healthy diet makes the body strong and increases a sense of well-being. Watch those double-lattes. Caffeine and nicotine put more stress on our musculature and nervous system.
9. Talk to others. Sharing life's difficulties and problems with another person, whether a co-worker, friend, spouse, lover, or counselor, allows one to shed the weight of burdens shouldered alone.
10. Face your difficulties. Problems have a tendency to mount quickly, until there can seem so many as to be overwhelming. Tackle them one at a time. Set achievable goals. Your day will seem appreciably lighter after even one dreaded task is tackled.

# HEALTH

## Articles

### Holiday Blues

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Feeling "let down" (sad, tired, lacking in energy) after the holidays is usually a sign that the holidays were disappointing, unpleasant, or frustrating.

The answer "true" when asked this question. The holidays can be a time of joy, fun, and excitement. They can also be tiring, disappointing. People sometimes feel "blue" or let down during or immediately after the holidays. It is easy to assume that these feelings are a result of things that did not go well; that changes need to be made. That might be one explanation. However, that "let down" feeling may be nothing more than your body's need to relax and recuperate after a very busy and hectic schedule.

During the holidays, there are many events, activities, and people that act as stressors. Stressors are anything that cause stress. Some stressors are positive events while others are the result of things that we look forward to. Negative stressors that can occur around the holidays are disappointment over gifts, concern about spending too much money, loneliness, not being able to get home for the holidays, not seeing many people. But, events that we truly look forward to can also be stressful - visiting with friends and families, playing with children, you don't see very often, wrapping gifts, preparing food, decorating the house, eating favorite or special food, and the change of

Remember that some people do truly become depressed during the holidays. Holidays are not a magical cure for people who are depressed. The best gift you might be able to give someone who is depressed is the assurance that you don't expect him/her to automatically feel better during a holiday. Encourage involvement in holiday activities and events, but give that person some space and permission to leave when needed.

One major concern is stress overload. Stress can be caused by a single major event such as the disappointment that occurs when an event that you had planned keeps family members away from a planned gathering. It can also result from a pile up of little things, even things we enjoy -- late evenings, the added tension of having house guests, time schedules, a change in routine, etc. The body needs a chance to rest. Without these rest periods, individuals are more susceptible to emotional tension and physical illness. There is also more risk of family communication breakdown.

While there are things that are beyond our control, there are things we can do to keep holiday stress in check.

Expectations for the holiday season manageable. Don't try to make it "the best ever." Plan and prioritize the most important activities. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Pace yourself. Organize your time. Set a budget and stick to it! Don't forget to add the cost of all those special holiday foods that you plan to prepare. Engage in holiday activities that are free such as driving around to look at decorations or go window-shopping without buying anything.

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Excessive drinking will only make you tired and depressed.

Be supportive and care about you. Make new friends if you are alone during special times.

Be creative. The holidays don't need to be just like they were in the "good old days" to be enjoyable. Develop some new holiday traditions in a way you have not done before.

Use all your time providing activities for your family and friends.

When you experience post-holiday blues are a sign that something did not go well, remember that this reaction may be nothing more than a pre-stress stage. If the holidays weren't what you expected, talk it over with your family and make sure you enjoyed your holidays but still have that "let down" feeling, try to relax and just accept your body and mind's need for some fun filled time.

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## Preventing Holiday Blues

"Holiday blues" range from mild sadness during the holidays to severe depression. This sadness can be prevented, and if it's already present, it can be eased.

### Preventing Holiday Blues

To help prevent holiday blues, follow these tips from the Centers for Disease Control and American Psychological Association, the National Mental Health Association, and the Mental Health Association of Colorado:

#### If you are experiencing holiday blues:

- Establish realistic goals and expectations for the holiday season, and do not label a time to cure all past problems. The holidays do not prevent sadness or loneliness.
- Limit your drinking.
- Do not feel obliged to feel festive. Accept your inner experience and do not force specific feelings. If you have recently experienced a tragedy, death, or romantic loss, be honest about your needs.
- To relieve holiday stress, know your spending limit and stick to it. Enjoy holiday shopping such as driving around to look at holiday decorations. Go window shopping with a friend.
- Express your feelings to those around you in a constructive, honest, and open way. Do not confront someone with a problem, begin your sentences with "I feel."

#### If someone you know is experiencing holiday blues:

- Try to involve that person in holiday activities, but don't be forceful.
- Be a good listener. If people express suicidal thoughts or feel depressed, hopeless, or lonely, be supportive. Let them know you are there for them and are willing to help them seek professional help. Never issue challenges or dares.
- Familiarize yourself with resources such as mental health centers, counseling centers, and support groups.
- If the depressed person is chronically ill, express that you understand that the holidays can be difficult.
- Be aware that holidays can be difficult for people, especially when reality doesn't match their expectations. Help them establish what is realistic and what is not.

Holiday blues can affect both men and women, young and old. Factors contributing to holiday blues include increased stress and fatigue, unrealistic expectations, too much commercialization, and the demands of the holiday season on one's family. The increased demands of shopping, parties, family reunions, and houseguests can contribute to tension and sadness during the holidays. Common stress reactions during the holidays include excessive drinking, over-eating or not eating enough, and difficulty sleeping.

A post-holiday let down, resulting from emotional disappointments during the holiday season, and physical reactions caused by excess fatigue and stress, may cause holiday blues to continue. For some people—particularly those who live in the northern, darker regions—holiday blues can be a sign of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD results from fewer hours of sunlight as the days get shorter in the winter months.

### American Psychological Association (APA)

Phone: 202-336-5500

<http://www.apa.org/>

### Depression Awareness, Recognition and Treatment (D/ART) Program

Mental Health Association of Colorado

719-595-8810



Phone: 303-377-3040

[www.coolware.com/health/medical\\_reporter/holidays.html](http://www.coolware.com/health/medical_reporter/holidays.html)

**National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association**

Phone: 312-642-0049 or 1-800- 826-3632

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**National Mental Health Association (NMHA)**

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## Relationship Conflict: Healthy or Unhealthy

### There is no such thing as a relationship without conflict

Conflict is a part of life. It exists as a reality of any relationship, and is not necessarily with no apparent conflict may be unhealthier than one with frequent conflict. Conflicts can weaken or strengthen a relationship. Conflicts can be productive, creating deeper understanding and respect, or they can be destructive, causing resentment, hostility and divorce. How often they occur, is the critical factor in determining whether a relationship will be healthy, satisfying or unsatisfying, friendly or unfriendly, deep or shallow, intimate or cold. Conflicts over minor unimportant differences to critical fights. There are conflicts of needs, wants, preferences, opinions, beliefs and values.

### Styles of Conflict Resolution:

- ▶ **Avoiding** or **denying** the existence of a conflict.
- ▶ Many people prefer to **give in** rather than struggle through the conflict.
- ▶ Some people **get mad** and **blame** the other person.
- ▶ Others are competitive and have to win. They use their **power** and influence to control the other.
- ▶ Some appear to compromise but are subtly **manipulative** in trying to win more ground.
- ▶ A few people can control their anger, competitive, I-give-up feelings and self-serve. They genuinely seek a fair, optimal solution for both parties. This is a **creative integration**.

### Three Types of Healthy Solutions:

- ▶ **Win-win.** Most conflicts are in areas that have more than two alternatives. If you and your partner want, and your partner does not like your choice, with a little more effort you can find another alternative that you both like and want.
- ▶ **No lose.** When you cannot find an alternative that you both want, look for an option that is acceptable to you, or negotiate an agreeable compromise. Neither gets everything he/she wants and both are satisfied.
- ▶ **Win-lose equally.** When the conflict is over an issue that has **only** two choices, one that you want and the other will not. There will be a winner and a loser. If you are generally half the time each gets your own way; it will be easier for each of you to trust that next time or the time after that he/she will be the winner.

**Healthy Conflict Resolution** is easy to understand intellectually, but not as easy to do consistently. It does however become easier once the skills and trust are developed. People often see conflicts as a problem to be solved by **them**. It isn't getting the best deal for **me**; it is getting the best deal for **us**. They each must actively participate and make the effort and commitment to work out **solutions that are fair and acceptable to both**.

If you disregard, minimize or invalidate your spouse's position, or if you must always win, you will damage your relationship. Your lack of sensitivity, consideration and respect of your spouse's needs will hurt and smoldering resentment. If fear and power is used to win, the relationship will be damaged. If you are just a willing giver constantly trying to keep your spouse happy by satisfying their needs, you will also damage your relationship. You will inadvertently teach your spouse to be insensitive to your needs and self-serving at your expense. Your self-esteem and self-

insensitive to your needs and self-serving at your expense. Your self-esteem and self-Resentment will fester, poisoning you to the relationship.

### **Attitudes Needed for Healthy Conflict Resolution:**

Start with the right frame of mind. Approach the conflict as *two equals working together on a problem*. Don't be so caught-up with your immediate want that you lose sight of and want of having a long, healthy relationship. If you are too angry or hurt to be able to remain respectful let yourself calm down before dealing with the issue.

Handling a conflict with a loved one, or someone you want to have a good, long-term relationship is different than negotiating with someone who doesn't care about your needs, such as a business deal. With a loved one you have to be concerned with his/her best interests. You both should be open, honest, respectful, not deceptive, manipulative or disrespectful. Mutual trust is a necessary condition for a long-term relationship and neither partner should do anything to weaken it.

Having a negative, distrustful attitude is detrimental to this process: believing you must win or otherwise lose face is a bad attitude; feeling superior or being *hard nosed* and feeling resentful are also harmful approaches.

### **Stages of Healthy Conflict Resolution:**

- ▶ **Identify the problem or issues.** Have a discussion to understand both sides of the conflict and preferred outcomes. Clarify to each other exactly what the conflict or problem is. In the first stage where you say what you want and you listen to what your partner wants. Then in the second stage each to clearly express what you each want and to understand what the other wants. Be open and avoid the blaming *you messages*. Also use your *active listening* skills when you listen to the other side.
- ▶ **Generate several possible solutions.** This is the creative integrative part. Draw on your own ideas, agree on and upon your shared goals and interests, look for several possible alternative solutions to the problem. Avoid evaluating and judging each idea until it looks as though no more ideas are possible. This is a brainstorming approach.
- ▶ **Evaluate the alternative solutions.** Consider each suggested solution and eliminate those that are not acceptable to either of you. Keep narrowing them down to one or two that seem best. In this stage you both must be honest and be able to say things like, "I wouldn't be happy with that solution, but that would be fair for me."
- ▶ **Decide on the best solution.** Select the alternative that is mutually acceptable to both. In this stage there is a mutual commitment to the decision.
- ▶ **Implement the solution.** It is one thing to arrive at a decision, another to carry it out. In this stage necessary to talk about how it is to be implemented. Who is responsible to do what?
- ▶ **Follow-up evaluation.** Not all mutually agreed upon solutions turn out to be as good as expected. Make it a routine to ask your partner how the solution is working and how he/she may have been overlooked, misjudged, or something unexpected may have occurred. It is important to have the understanding that decisions are always open for revision, but that modifications should be agreed upon, as was the initial decision.

### **Common Mistakes:**

- ▶ Not discussing with your partner the method used to resolve your conflicts.
- ▶ Discovering too late that more information was needed, e.g., "I should have placed my cards earlier, but they are sold out."
- ▶ Being too invested in getting your way, or making extreme demands, and therefore not being flexible enough to be fair with your partner.
- ▶ Forgetting that there are usually several ways of doing things and that your own way is not the only one. We humans have a consistent tendency to believe that we are right and are being fair. It is much more effective if you are willing to see the other person's view.
- ▶ Focusing too much on what you could lose and not enough on what you both could gain.
- ▶ Believing the other person must lose for you to win.
- ▶ Bringing in additional issues before resolving the one you started..

If you both stay true to your partner **and** true to yourself you should have a good, healthy relationship.

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## Holiday Depression & Stress

The holiday season is a time full of joy, cheer, parties, and family gatherings. However, for many people, it is a time of self-evaluation, loneliness, reflection on past failures, and anxiety about an uncertain future.

### What Causes Holiday Blues?

Many factors can cause the “holiday blues”: stress, fatigue, unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, financial constraints, and the inability to be with one’s family and friends. The demands of shopping, parties, family reunions, and house guests also contribute to feelings of tension. People who do not become depressed may develop other stress responses, such as: headaches, excessive drinking, over-eating, and difficulty sleeping. Even more people experience post-holiday let down after January 1. This can result from disappointments during the preceding months compounded with the excess fatigue and stress.

### Coping with Stress and Depression During the Holidays

- **Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable.** Try to set realistic goals for yourself. Pace yourself. Organize your time. Make a list and prioritize the important activities. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Do not put entire focus on just one day (i.e., Thanksgiving Day) remember it is a season of holiday sentiment and activities can be spread out (time-wise) to lessen stress and increase enjoyment.
- **Remember the holiday season does not banish reasons for feeling sad or lonely;** there is room for these feelings to be present, even if the person chooses not to express them.
- **Leave “yesteryear” in the past and look toward the future.** Life brings changes. Each season is different and can be enjoyed in its own way. Don’t set yourself up in comparing today with the “good ol’ days.”
  - **Do something for someone else.** Try volunteering some time to help others.
- **Enjoy activities that are free,** such as driving around to look at holiday decorations; going window shopping without buying; making a snowperson with children.
  - **Be aware that excessive drinking will only increase your feelings of depression.**
    - **Try something new.** Celebrate the holidays in a new way.
- **Spend time with supportive and caring people.** Reach out and make new friends or contact someone you have not heard from for awhile

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- **Save time for yourself!** Recharge your batteries! Let others share responsibility of activities.

#### **Can Environment Be a Factor?**

Recent studies show that some people suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD) which results from fewer hours of sunlight as the days grow shorter during the winter months. Phototherapy, a treatment involving a few hours of exposure to intense light, is effective in relieving depressive symptoms in patients with SAD.

Other studies on the benefits of phototherapy found that exposure to early morning sunlight was effective in relieving seasonal depression. Recent findings, however, suggest that patients respond equally well to phototherapy whether it is scheduled in the early afternoon. This has practical applications for antidepressant treatment since it allows the use of phototherapy in the workplace as well as the home.

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