

Maintaining your mental and physical health during the holidays



It's time for the razzle-dazzle of holiday windows, hot chocolate and warm memories! 'Tis the season for all those good things... and very often, the fallout of what might just be the most mentally and physically draining time of the year. As the holiday season swings into high gear, we're offering a few tips and tricks to help keep your mind and body prepared for the season.

Alcohol Consumption

With end-of-the-year party season upon us, you're likely to encounter a number of social events where alcohol may be readily available. Remember, when consuming alcohol, it pays to be thoughtful in your choices.

Eat and stay hydrated. Try a meal rich in carbohydrates and protein. Both reduce the effects of alcohol on your body.¹ Keeping food in your stomach while drinking also slows absorption of alcohol into your system, helping to curb excess inebriation, so have some finger foods or easy-to-eat appetizers while you sip. Staying hydrated is just as important. Alcohol is dehydrating, and leaves you thirstier than when you started. Reach for some water or other non-alcoholic fare alongside, or in lieu of, another drink to keep the effects of alcohol well managed.

Limit your intake. Decide beforehand how much you'll drink so you know when to stop. Tell someone you trust at the event to stay accountable. If you get tipsy after two beers, stop after one to be safe. If you'll be having more than a couple of drinks, alternate water for alcohol to keep your system balanced and always keep careful track of how much you're drinking.

**Size matters!
What's in your glass and what actually constitutes a serving can be vastly different.** When tracking alcohol intake keep in mind: 1 beer: 12 ounces, malt beer: 8 ounces, wine: 5 ounces, hard alcohol: 1.5 ounces.²

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Choose your drink wisely. Everyone reacts to alcohol differently. Make your choices, accordingly. If you tend to drink something's faster than others, go for the latter. Remember, the stronger the flavor, the slower people drink. The body absorbs carbonated drinks more quickly with diet sodas resulting in an even higher blood alcohol content.³ Bottom line: be mindful of your reactions to different types of alcohol.

Eating Healthy

So many delicious seasonal menu choices can trigger over-eating and weight gain. According to the National Institutes of Health, holiday eating can add an extra pound or two every year⁴. Over time, those add up and can wreak havoc on your mental and physical health. Worry not! Simple strategies can keep your eating habits in check.

Eat regular, balanced meals. Skipping meals or grabbing fast food on the fly makes it harder to resist making rash, unhealthy choices when eating. Make sure you do your best to get three balanced meals every day, and snack wisely on fruits, veggies or nuts.

Make your plate pretty. The old adage, "you eat first with your eyes" is true. Make your meals visually appealing to look forward to eating them even more. For an extra pretty and nutritious punch, fill half your plate with seasonal, colourful fruits and vegetables for valuable vitamins and minerals.

Survey the buffet before you start scooping. When faced with a variety of foods with different tastes, textures, smells, and colours, people eat more, regardless of true hunger level.⁵ Pre-check the entire buffet to forego items you don't care for as much in lieu of the foods you really enjoy. Cutting down the choices on your plate also decreases what you eat by 20 to 40 percent.⁵ Balance higher calorie items with low calorie leafy greens and lean proteins.

Take your time enjoying every meal. Use mealtimes to take a breather amid the seasonal chaos. Savouring the experience encourages more thoughtful, slow eating. A pleasurable mealtime ritual that leaves you emotionally and physically content will also help you resist the urge to grab small, often unhealthy, high calorie snacks.

Remember, it's not all or nothing. Your waistline won't blow up from one instance of overeating. To gain just one pound, your body needs 500 extra calories, daily (that's 3500 extra calories a week!). So, if you go all in on at the holiday lunch, don't sweat it. Just take it easy at your next meal and incorporate a few more healthy, low calorie foods.

Try healthier holiday dishes. Check out Google or Pinterest for some new recipe inspiration. Or, try to cut fat and calories from your usual dishes. Skimming the fat off the top of refrigerated gravy chops 56 grams of fat per cup, while eating turkey breast skinless cuts 11 grams of saturated fat (per each 3 ounce serving.)⁴

Indulge a little (and don't feel guilty about it)! Holiday treats are a once-a-year deal, so be flexible. Give yourself permission to satisfy those gingerbread, latke, and candy cane cravings now and then. Just keep portions small and maintain your other healthy eating strategies.

Social Pressures and Awkward Events

Experts say the holidays can make people feel out of control.⁶ There's no one approach to deal with all the unique pressures and goings on over the holidays, but to make it through feeling confident, content and in control try prioritizing and practicing self-care and conscious planning.

Set boundaries. With expectations, traditions, parties and planning in high gear, draw firm boundaries for yourself. If pressure to attend holiday gatherings stresses you out, only attend those you deem necessary. Stay for an hour or two at that work party instead of the whole thing. Anxious and feeling awkward about extended visits with family? Cut it down to a few days instead. Establishing a plan and an itinerary ahead of time frees up precious emotional bandwidth, and time you can use for things you enjoy.

Keep things simple. Prioritizing and consciously paring things back to the tried and true basics can work wonders on relieving stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Simplifying the preparation for awkward events and social pressures isn't as difficult as you might think: If you know you're expected to attend a high-end holiday office event, lift the emotional and financial burden of figuring out what to wear by opting for a simple, classic black ensemble with a favourite accessory. Make the family dinner you're hosting a potluck to cut your time in the kitchen and add bonding time with your loved ones. Don't know anyone at the corporate seasonal lunch? Beforehand, think of a few light conversation topics to break the ice.

Exercise! Relieve holiday pressures and get into a better, more confident frame of mind before social gatherings by staying active, everyday. Even 10-15 minutes can make a difference, stimulating endorphins and giving your body and brain a boost. Exercise also offsets all those extra holiday calories!



Budget your time and money. Don't let social pressures force you into spending more cash or emotional bandwidth than you can afford. You may need to spend hours and money on a smorgasbord of people and stuff, but controlling how much, and deciding on those limits before you begin doling them out, is a big help in coping – and feeling confident in dealing with - stressors and events.

Pick your battles. Being in close quarters in high intensity, and pressure filled events can bring about colourful conversations and highlight differences in personality and opinions. Consciously approach these interactions with levity and if necessary, agree to disagree to keep the mood festive and fun.

Set realistic expectations. Remind yourself that perfection is a myth. Idealized holiday images are everywhere and can lead to feelings of inadequacy. "There's this idea that [the holidays]...are supposed to be joyful and stress-free," says Ken Duckworth, MD. "That's not the case [and not realistic]."⁶ Relationships, and holiday specific situations can be complicated. Accept family, friends and yourself as you all are, be flexible and don't worry about how things should be. Instead, focus on what you can and want to do.

Practice self-compassion. The most important in dealing with all of the social pressures and awkward events over the season is to take good care of and be kind to yourself. Take time to sleep well, decompress and do what brings you peace and happiness, be it a massage, reading or simply taking a walk.

Maintaining your mental and physical health during the holidays doesn't just help keep stress and anxiety-related illness at bay, it also makes space for you to really bask in and relish the season on your own terms, so make self-care a priority to get the very most out of this special time of year.

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