



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Holiday Stress

Stress results when demands exceed our ability to cope...

Preparing for and celebrating the holidays comes with increased demands on our time and activity. We feel stressed when we cannot meet the demand and there can be several reasons why this is so. One of the common ways that coping may fall short has to do with expectations. Another has to do with the kinds of strategies we use to cope when under stress. When expectations (of ourselves, of others, of how the celebration should unfold) are not realistic, stress is often the result. Holidays and celebrations are events out of the ordinary and we often expect something extraordinary of them. Many of us want to find the perfect gift, prepare the perfect meal or host the family gathering where every member of the family brings out their best and most loving behaviour.

When events don't turn out as planned, we can end up feeling frustrated or disappointed. When expectations are too high, when they are not met or when things happen that we cannot control (for example, we cannot control how well others get along with each other), stress is the likely result. Sometimes the expectations we place on special events are based on how we think or hope an event should go. We may have a picture in our minds, from a story or movie, about what a holiday is supposed to be like and then go about trying to make it so. If that picture involves people behaving in ways they don't usually behave, or in ways that are just not likely outside of a movie script, the process is likely to be stressful and we are likely to end up disappointed.

The past few years have been challenging for the economy and people's bank accounts. Yet some of us will go into this holiday season with the same set of expectations for gift giving that we had during better economic times. By continuing to hang on to those same expectations for gift giving, we either end up feeling that we disappointed someone by not spending enough on a gift or stressed because we spent more than we could really afford.

How we cope with stress can make it better or worse.

We each have particular ways of coping with stress; some good and some not so good. Sometimes we may turn to food or alcohol when stressed. Although it may feel good to overeat or drink in the short term, chances are that using these coping mechanisms will lead to distress later on. Though the two pieces of chocolate cake may feel good when you are eating them, they don't feel quite so good after the fact. Further, these kinds of coping strategies can take a toll on our health in other ways (for example, overeating may lead to weight gain and increased blood sugar).



How to better cope with holiday stress...

The good holiday news is that it is possible to manage stress well. After all, life is never stress free and we can successfully cope with it.

- **Review your expectations for the holidays.** Whose expectations are they? Are they yours or someone else's? For example, is the picture you have of the holiday celebration really yours? Are your expectations based on what is possible today or on what might have been possible in the past? What you can and want to do at 30 might be very different from what you can and want to do at 60. Finally, are your expectations based on what is possible or only on what you hope will happen but never has? The best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. If your siblings have never gotten along at a family dinner it is not likely that anything will change unless they make some commitment to behave differently. Make sure your expectations are realistic.
- **Even if your expectations seem realistic, make sure that you are expecting something over which you have some control.** People tend to feel stressed when they are in situations over which they have no control. If the success of your holidays depends too much on others' behaviour, you may be disappointed. Make sure that you plan an event that you can help make happen.
- **Let others know what your expectations of them are and ask for help if you need it.** Don't assume people will automatically know what you need or want from them for the holiday to be a success. If you need help, ask for it.
- **Pace yourself.** Take on what you can manage. Spending more than you can afford, baking more than you think you have time for, or inviting more people to a family dinner than you think you can accommodate is likely to lead to stress and frustration. Do the best you can within your means and limits.
- **Review your coping strategies.** You may well feel stressed at times during a special event. Plan how you will cope if that happens. Try to choose coping strategies that leave you feeling good in the short term and the long term. Time out for physical or relaxation exercises, a walk, or hobbies can be great ways of coping with stress and are good lifestyle practices in general.
- **Focus on what really matters.** People whose holiday experiences focus on relationships and activities with others report more happiness than those for who gift giving is a big focus[1]. Think about what is more important – the perfect purchase, a turkey cooked on time or enjoying an activity with friends and family.
- **If despite your best efforts, you feel overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety or sadness, consider professional help.** When stress leads to distress like anxiety or depression that are persistent and get in the way of accomplishing your usual activities, it can be a good idea to contact a general health care provider or one who specializes in mental health problems.



You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services.

For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology go to:

[http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/.](http://www.cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/)

This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Dr. K. R. Cohen, Executive Director, Canadian Psychological Association.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

Canadian Psychological Association
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3
Tel: 613-237-2144
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657

[1] Kasser, T. And Sheldon, K.M. (2002). What Makes for a Merry Christmas? *Journal of Happiness Studies* **3**, 313-329.