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## Introduction

It's a sad fact that the supposedly joyful winter holidays can be one of the most stressful times of year for a lot of folk. For those already suffering from stress, the endless planning, shopping and cooking present an often unbearable extra burden on an already over-stretched nervous system.

Simply spending more time than usual with family or friends, while apparently enjoyable, can turn out to be one of the biggest stressors of all. This is especially true for those of us who are separated from loved ones at this time through divorce, separation or widowhood.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation are heightened by the seasonal emphasis on happy families that we see all around us. It is hardly surprising that organizations such as the Samaritans report a sharp rise in numbers of callers over the Christmas period.

For many people, the economic downturn has already caused immense stress and worry. The additional demands on our pockets at this time of year simply pile on yet more stress and add to our anxiety over financial difficulties. Coupled with the shame and guilt often experienced when dealing with money issues, this means that many

people beat themselves up even more over not having enough to provide festive food for the table or presents for the kids.

A lot of this holiday stress is due to our own expectations. We ask a lot of ourselves at this time of year and we are led to believe that everything has to be perfect. Just take a look at all those images on TV and in magazines: ideal families smiling out at you from immaculate homes surrounded by piles of gleaming presents.

Of course we know deep down that real life is not like that. It doesn't help, though, to be reminded of our own seeming inadequacy in not measuring up to an impossible ideal. It is possible, however, to reduce holiday stress to the point where you can actually enjoy the festive season.

To help you do that, this report contains 100 brilliant tips that will cover every eventuality to ensure that you and your loved ones have a truly relaxed and stress free holiday season!

Even for people who have not been diagnosed with a pre-existing anxiety disorder, the prospect of Thanksgiving, Christmas and the host of other celebrations that occur around this time can bring on a first attack.

## 100 Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress

### Mental Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress

1. Take time for yourself – give yourself a mini break from routine to read, snooze or simply take a relaxing bath.
2. Set priorities and stick to them – you can't do everything so decide what is most important for you.
3. Give to others by volunteering at a community center or project – there is plenty of evidence that focusing on others less fortunate than yourself relieves stress and raises self-esteem.
4. Meditate, even if it's for only a few moments a day. You can do this almost anywhere, even while taking a stroll around your neighborhood. Which leads me on to...
5. Take a walk! While you do so, take in all the sounds and sights around you and really appreciate them. This is another great way to focus out rather than in.
6. Play – whether it's a board game with your family or a card game with a friend.

7. Pray – in whatever way is appropriate for you. Connecting with something greater than ourselves is a proven stress buster and the power of prayer is well documented.
8. Practice positive self-talk. Write a seasonal affirmation for yourself such as ‘I am handling the holidays calmly and with ease.’ Stick notes up around the house with your affirmation(s) and keep a copy in your pocket to refer to whenever necessary.
9. Use positive visualization to see yourself easily handling seasonal situations which might prove stressful such as a party or family gathering.
10. Lower your expectations – do not expect everything to go perfectly or everyone to behave perfectly. It won’t, they won’t and you will survive!

### **Physical Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress**

11. Start or maintain a regular exercise routine. Exercise is one of the best ways to combat stress as it releases endorphins into the body while at the same time lowering blood pressure.
12. Practice yoga or tai chi, both of which reduce heart rate and take our focus away from troubling thoughts or situations

as we are forced to concentrate on the correct breathing and poses.

- 13.** Get some fresh air at least once a day – too many of us spend too much time cooped up indoors over the festive season.
- 14.** Make sure you get enough quality sleep – at least 7 uninterrupted hours a night and preferably 8 is optimum.
- 15.** Treat yourself to a massage or some other kind of relaxing bodywork such as reflexology or Reiki.
- 16.** Practice deep breathing – we all tend to breathe more shallowly when stressed so stand tall and relaxed and really fill up your lungs, breathing in on a slow count of 5-10 and trying to expand your ribs at the same time. Breathe out just as slowly to the same count. Repeat often over the holidays.
- 17.** Avoid excess alcohol, sugar, caffeine and sodium – all of which are found in festive fare!
- 18.** Make sure you eat healthily to counteract the above and add extra fruits and vegetables to your diet. Try eating 5 small meals a day instead of 3 big ones to counteract the load placed on your overstressed digestive system by all that rich food.
- 19.** Take multivitamin, mineral and/or herbal supplements where necessary. Vitamins B6 and B12 help support your system against stress. Magnesium is an excellent stress-busting mineral and the herbs passionflower and kava have been shown to reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety.

- 20.** Indulge in physical affection – cuddle someone close to you, make love or simply stroke a beloved pet. All have been shown to counteract the effects of stress, lowering heart rate and calming mind and body.

### **Emotional Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress**

- 21.** Set aside time to think about lost loved ones. Light a candle in their memory or carry out some small ceremony meaningful to them and you. Talk about them with others who knew them – share reminiscences or photos. Celebrate who they were.
- 22.** Bear in mind that one of the main reasons for the holidays is renewal through sharing love and faith with others. Find your way to do this, whether within a religious context or simply by expressing your feelings to a special person.
- 23.** Don't beat yourself up if you don't feel happy all or even some of the time – the holiday blues are entirely normal and the first step to tackling them is to accept them for what they are and realise they are only temporary.



- 24.** Communicate with friends and/or family about how you are feeling. Bottling things up just adds to stress and can make it seem overwhelming.
- 25.** If you are feeling lonely, reach out to those around you. Call a friend or a service such as the Samaritans or volunteer with a holiday project. Many people feel lonely at this time of year – not just the elderly, who may have no family, but young people as well who tend to rely on friends.
- 26.** Understand that you may be suffering from Seasonal Emotional Disturbance (also known as Seasonal Affective Disorder) which affects many people during the winter months. As daylight is reduced and people spend more time inside they are afflicted with this mild form of depression. Light therapy with special lamps can help as can making sure you get as much daylight as possible.
- 27.** Don't magnify your problems by imagining that everyone else is having a much better time than you. Chances are they are not!
- 28.** Make time each day to think about all the good things in your life rather than the not so good. Be grateful for those things and write out a gratitude list that you can refer back to when you are feeling stressed out or down in the dumps.
- 29.** At least once a day, switch off from the festive atmosphere and check in with yourself. How are you feeling? What can you do about it? Can you pamper yourself a little if you are

feeling neglected? Can you ask for help if you are feeling overwhelmed?

- 30.** Love properly and well. This includes loving yourself as best you can – taking time to attend to your own needs and saying ‘no’ whenever appropriate or necessary. Loving others properly includes accepting them for who and what they are because the minute you do this, the less stressful you will find their peculiarities and quirks!

### **Practical Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress**

- 31.** Set yourself manageable deadlines and stick to them. Write those Christmas cards by 1<sup>st</sup> December, for example, and post them the next day so you can tick them off your...
- 32.** To do list. Essential if you are to prioritise effectively (see the section on Mental Ways To Reduce Stress) and alleviates stress by allowing to see what you are achieving as you tick things off.
- 33.** Make a separate present list and tick it off as you go – it will help you stick within budget and there will be no last minute panic when you realise you’ve forgotten to buy grandpa his socks.

- 34.** Wrap presents as you buy them, that way you won't be left struggling with sticky tape on Christmas Eve.
- 35.** Avoid weekend crowds if possible and shop first thing in the morning or out of hours. Or shop on the internet and avoid the crowds altogether. Whatever you do, don't shop on Christmas Eve!
- 36.** Stock up on batteries well beforehand and make sure you have the right types for the toys or gadgets that you buy.
- 37.** Don't overstock the kitchen cupboards or fridge – most shops are only closed for a day or two at most so there is no need to act as if you are preparing for a siege.
- 38.** Make sure you have enough prescription medicine for everyone in the family and that you have taken note of out of hours pharmacy services in your area just in case.
- 39.** Delegate chores: childcare, shopping, looking after guests and clearing up can all be carried out by other family members or friends.
- 40.** Set realistic goals and use the above tip to achieve them if necessary. Remember: there is no such thing as a Perfect Christmas Competition.

### Ways To Reduce Monetary Seasonal Stress

- 41.** Set a budget for the festive season and stick to it – this includes food, presents, entertainment and everyday items.
- 42.** Remember that the best things in life really are free. The sheer materialism of the season places enormous amounts of stress on adults and children alike. Get out into nature, laugh with family and friends, sing with a choir or just smile – that alone will reduce stress.
- 43.** Get making – there is something really special about a homemade present and, in these tough economic times, the hours of love and effort you put in are truly appreciated far more than how much you have spent.
- 44.** Try swapping time and skills with a friend or family member – instead of paying for that relaxing massage, give one to each other or, if that's not your thing, then swap say a tray of home-baked mince pies for help shovelling the yard.
- 45.** Keep it simple – there is no need to go overboard on decorations or food. In fact, there is nothing that says you have to have the whole turkey feast if that's not what you want. Many people have something else altogether, perhaps because they are vegetarian or for religious or cultural reasons.
- 46.** Join a Christmas club or set aside regular amounts throughout the year so that the holiday season does not

present too much of a strain on your wallet. If it's too late this year, consider doing it for next.

- 47.** Share – think about joining forces with family or friends so that, say, one of you does the turkey, another brings the desserts and so on.
- 48.** Do a gift exchange – set an affordable amount that each person spends then put names in a hat and give out the gifts accordingly.
- 49.** Limit alcohol – as well as being expensive, it tends to lead to a loss of inhibition over excess spending.
- 50.** Socialise at home or in friends' houses rather than at restaurants and bars. If you receive an invitation to a gathering at a restaurant or bar that you feel you cannot afford, gracefully decline but offer an alternative, e.g. 'I'm sorry I can't make it Thursday but how about you come round to us for a drink before Christmas?'

### **Ways To Reduce Family Seasonal Stress**

- 51.** Don't expect family members to suddenly change just because it's the holidays. They won't. Acceptance of their faults and foibles means far less stress for you.

- 52.** Take time out from one another. A family forced to spend time together combined with too much food and drink is a recipe for disaster. Schedule in a walk, a trip to a park or simply time out alone in your room.
- 53.** Involve family members in the holiday decision making – that way they can't try to blame you if things go wrong.
- 54.** Remember that you can't change others but you can change your response to them. Rather than responding to a relative's insults, let them float over you. If you find someone's behavior annoying, focus on something else or simply remove yourself from the situation.
- 55.** Forget about the past – especially during the festive season when old insults and hurts can arise to spoil the celebrations.
- 56.** Stick to your normal routine where possible, especially if it involves kids. We all find change stressful so keep it to a minimum.
- 57.** Set and stick to healthy boundaries – don't make too many demands on family members and, more importantly, don't allow them to place excessive demands on you.
- 58.** Cherish this time for reconnecting with your family rather than resenting their company or the extra demands on you that might bring.

- 59.** Avoid family misunderstandings by remaining flexible in your attitudes and plans. Huge family gatherings can be great but they can also represent a nightmare for some people and no family member should be resented for choosing to opt out.
- 60.** Try not to assign family members expected roles, e.g. ‘the dork,’ ‘the baby,’ ‘the spoiled princess.’ See them as they are now rather than as they may have been at some stage in the past.

### Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress For Introverts

- 61.** Often, introverts suffer most stress at a time like Christmas when they are forced into situations which are alien to their nature. Simply recognizing and accepting that you are introverted is a big step in managing this stress – it’s OK not to want to be the life and soul of the party or to prefer quiet time with yourself or one or two friends as opposed to a big crowd.
- 62.** Pinpoint the cause of your stress – is it due to internal or external factors? External factors include situations such as Christmas parties or shopping trips. Internal ones include such scenarios as too high expectations of yourself or others. Once you have established whether your stress is due to

situations outside of yourself or your own behavioral response then you will be better equipped to deal with it.

- 63.** Offer to help out at a holiday event. Introverts often feel much better in a social situation if they have a task to focus upon such as handing out drinks or replenishing a buffet.
- 64.** Find like-minded folk and connect with them. Rather than stressing yourself out trying to deal with people who simply don't 'get' you, seek out some similarly introverted souls and connect with them at gatherings or parties. This will make you feel a whole lot more comfortable and therefore a whole lot less stressed.
- 65.** Learn how to talk to strangers. Introverts often find small talk very difficult indeed so it helps to practice a few conversational openers and use them as a fallback during social situations.
- 66.** Know your social limits and stick to them. The winter holiday season can be physically and mentally exhausting – more so for introverts who tend to internalize a lot of stress. Say no to invitations when you feel yourself reaching your personal limit and take time out to replenish your reserves.
- 67.** Similarly, set a limit on the time you spend socializing. This is not your natural environment and therefore it causes additional stress to your system. Respect yourself and your nature and spend that time doing something you prefer.



- 68.** Don't give in to the expectations of others – if you like solitude at this time of year then that has nothing to do with them. Far too often, other people project their own wishes on to us. Understand that we are all different and that you are absolutely fine just as you are.
- 69.** Offer to cover for others at work or at home if that is what you would rather do. Folk with families will be very grateful and you will be truly expressing and receiving the goodwill that is supposed to be at the heart of the season.
- 70.** Positively enjoy solitary reflection and the extra opportunity you might have for it at this time of year. Light candles, listen to music, or simply sit and think over all that is good about your life and your own unique way of doing things.

### **Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress For Kids**

- 71.** Many children find the festive season just as stressful, or even more so, than adults. They feel the pressures of our materialistic society just as keenly so put the emphasis on time spent together and the real joys of the season rather than on whether or not they received the latest toy.

- 72.** Aim to reduce your own stress as much as possible using the tips given here. Children are highly sensitive and tend to take on board your own anxiety and stress.
- 73.** Give them lots of love, hugs and patience – that, after all, is what this time of year is really about.
- 74.** Spend peaceful time with each child daily, even if it's just for 10 minutes, and focus entirely on them.
- 75.** Involve kids in your holiday plans and preparation. Ask for and use their ideas and input.
- 76.** Encourage them to express their feelings through creative play, perhaps by drawing, painting or playing a musical instrument.
- 77.** Maintain your normal household routines – children are creatures of habit and find an upset routine more stressful than an adult would.
- 78.** Stick to your established rules for behavior and consequences if those rules are not met. Children like to know where the boundaries are, even if it's only to kick against them at times! Don't give in simply because it's the holidays or because you are tired or stressed.
- 79.** Talk with children about their feelings in a way they can understand and relate, especially if a family member is absent at this time of year through something such as death or divorce.

- 80.** Together with your kids, plan and participate in giving something to someone less fortunate.

## Foodie Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress

- 81.** Eat up your turkey! Good old Christmas turkey is packed with tryptophan which is an enzyme that encourages your brain to produce the feel-good hormone serotonin. Serotonin not only makes you happier, it also promotes better sleep. Dates, honey and ice cream are also good sources.
- 82.** When you are about to boil over, don't hit the bottle but grab a banana instead. These are full of potassium and one study found that eating just one banana a week reduced blood pressure by 10%.
- 83.** Make a cup of tea – levels of stress hormone cortisol have dropped by up to 47% after testers sipped just one cup of black tea.
- 84.** Eat more carbs – no, not fat-laden French fries and enormous slices of pizza but healthier carbs found in sweet potatoes, sweetcorn, baked or boiled potatoes and rice. Eating just one portion of rice or a baked potato per day can produce enough serotonin to counteract all the stress of those 24 hours.
- 85.** Snack on almonds rather than on potato chips or peanuts. These contain a chemical called phenylalanine which tells our brain to produce mood stabilising hormones like dopamine. Just a handful a day will help you feel far less stressed.

- 86.** Eat a balanced diet, incorporating enough protein and carbohydrate through healthful choices such as fruit, lean meat or fish, pulses and vegetables. This will help stabilise your moods and support your nervous system.
- 87.** Drink lots of water – dehydration can have a catastrophic effect on our minds and bodies, leading to all sorts of symptoms including headaches, fatigue and dizziness.
- 88.** Stick to low fat or skim milk which is high in stress-busting B vitamins and whisk yourself up a healthy breakfast shake of milk, frozen blueberries and a teaspoon of honey for the perfect start to a winter's day.
- 89.** Indulge in those Christmas oranges, mandarins or tangerines, both of which are high in vitamin C. Vitamin C helps fight free radicals, protecting the body from the cumulative effects of stress.
- 90.** Have a few squares of dark chocolate which is high in stress busting magnesium and has been found to lower stress hormones. A Swiss study showed that daily consumption of 40g or 1.4 ounces of dark chocolate over two weeks was sufficient to modify the metabolism of healthy human volunteers. The downside? 1.4 ounces or 40g is not a lot of chocolate...

## Fun Ways To Reduce Seasonal Stress

- 91.** Think up a whole new holiday tradition and practice it. You could also try letting go of old, outworn traditions – do you all really enjoy putting on this Christmas Elf hats every year?
- 92.** Go out for a drive in the country and grab a hot chocolate at a café along the way.
- 93.** Visit an animal park or zoo and see how the rest of the animal kingdom copes with the festive season – usually with complete indifference!
- 94.** Paint your toenails a whole range of sparkly colors, spray a mad streak in your hair or even dye it a new shade. This is doubly effective if you are male.
- 95.** Put on some music and dance, either alone or with family or friends. The one rule is to keep your eyes shut and really let go (while at the same time trying not to bump into one another!)
- 96.** Have story time even if you don't have kids. Pull out favorite books you read as a child and re-read them, either alone or aloud. If you do have kids, read them some of your best loved tales and let them reciprocate.

- 97.** Fill an old sock with two tennis balls and then run your bare feet over them – you'll be triggering 7000 nerve endings for a stress beating endorphin rush!
- 98.** Make friends with a fish – the hottest new relaxation trend practiced by Mariah Carey, Jessica Alba and Gwyneth Paltrow is fish-gazing where you sit in front of a fish bowl or aquarium and gaze at the inhabitants for 15 minutes a day. Studies have found that guppy gazers are as relaxed as a group of people who have been hypnotized with lower blood pressures and a reduction in stress as a result.
- 99.** Have a glass of wine or eggnog but don't overdo it – that way more stress lies! If you are teetotal, indulge in a delicious fruit cocktail or smoothie laced with seasonal cinnamon and vanilla.
- 100.** Engage in a pillow fight! Round up your kids, spouse or friends and get bashing with some old pillows. Set rules first and keep the emphasis firmly on fun. If there is no-one around, get a tennis racket or bat and bash that pillow instead!

**The Serenity Prayer**

Lord, help me to change  
the things I can change,  
to live with the things  
I can't change,  
and to have the wisdom  
to know the difference.