

Preventing Holiday Stress for Health Care Workers

The holiday season is upon us. For most people, this time of year is heavily associated with celebration, reunions of family and friends, and, for those who can take time off from work or whose employers or schools observe a winter break, rest and relaxation.

Unfortunately, the reality for many health care workers can be quite different. Holidays are often incredibly stressful as we manage increasing job demands on top of societal expectations for what holidays are “supposed” to be. Many health care workers feel added pressure throughout the holiday season, and many of us need help adopting new well-being practices or re-upping deserted practices in order to alleviate that pressure.

Keep reading for some of our favorite tips related to physical health, emotional health, relationships, and navigating expectations during the holidays. After reviewing the list of tips below, select a few actionable practices that you can prioritize to help maintain positive mental health.



General Tips

- 1. Recognize your holiday stress triggers¹.** We all have our limits, and knowing them ahead of time by taking an audit (e.g., what do I love about holidays? What stresses me out?) enables us to be proactive. One such method is **planning for and engaging in health escapes²**. During the holidays, well-being must be treated as a deliberate practice as it can easily fall from our attention. Healthy escapes emphasize relaxation and leisure, where we intentionally grant ourselves permission to enjoy time with friends and family. This can be protected by **creating meaningful rituals** regarding those healthy escapes³.
- 2. Set aside “health” days just as you would sick days.** Beyond COVID-19, illnesses tend to increase during the holiday season as the result of stress, busy schedules, and increased time spent with others in enclosed spaces. Try taking a “health” day in which preventative practices are put into place: Get that doctor’s visit in, stock up on medicines, purchase groceries in bulk, or find time to connect with a friend.
- 3. Monitor news consumption.** The constant news cycle can exacerbate holiday-time stress as advertisements and social pressure to consume become a priority for networks. In fact, networks may ramp up polarizing coverage to draw in viewers. Take a step back and allow yourself to consume news and social media in moderation this time of year.

Maintaining Physical Health

Physical health is a core well-being component that is often shunned during the holiday season due to time, stressors, and temptations. First, enjoy the holidays! For many of us, our respective cultural holidays are meant to be enjoyed with friends, family, and meaning. And — emphasis on “and” — we can enjoy in these holidays while caring for our physical health.

- 1. Prioritize your nutrition⁴.** It is tempting to rapidly change our diets during the holiday to accommodate all of our favorite dishes. There are many reasons, however, nutrition is consistently touted as one of the most critical factors of well-being. Mood is heavily influenced by nutrition; abruptly change your diet, and you abruptly change the way you think, feel, and act.
- 2. Stay active⁴.** It is absolutely OK to modify your workout schedule or preferred physical activities, but make a deliberate effort to prevent them from slipping from your attention entirely. When the holidays are over, it will be much easier to return to your normal schedule. Aim for *continued* engagement, if not full engagement.
- 3. Maintain healthful sleep habits⁴.** Sleep can be tricky to get right. There can be a lot of pressure to sleep less to meet deadlines, spend extra time with friends and family, or shop. On the flip side, you might face more pressure to sleep when you know your sleep practices are lacking, so you become anxious. For health care professionals, all of these factors can impact work with patients. Try prioritizing sleep as a part of your professional practice during the holidays. You are a health care worker, and as a health care worker, you must practice good sleep hygiene.
- 4. Practice relaxation strategies such as mindfulness, deep breathing, and visualization⁵.** We know that the holidays bring on more stress and less rest. All of the above tips might help, but it can be challenging to stick with them when under increased stress. Research shows that incorporating brief periods of tested methods such as deep breathing throughout the day are immensely beneficial. Will this cure your stress? No. Will it help slow down your day and return your focus to the present moment? Absolutely.

Maintaining Emotional Health

All the tips thus far will benefit emotional health indirectly. Yet it is critical to target emotional health explicitly and intentionally. Here, we have one critical takeaway:

The holiday season comes with a lot of pressure to be cheerful. But the reality is that sometimes we are not so cheerful. We work with sick patients, experience growing job demands, and may feel guilt or shame around gift-giving. **Adopt a more realistic approach to the holiday.** Winter can be hard for many of us, causing us to experience seasonal blues. For many, our go-to counter to this emotional experience is to ignore or avoid it. Have an honest conversation with your friends and family about red flags and make a game plan for what to do when those flags emerge.²

Maintaining Relationships

Relationships are at the core of the holiday season! It makes sense, then, that one of the best things we can do for our mental health is to lean into those relationships.

- 1. Ask yourself who has your back².** Identify your most nurturing relationships, celebrate others' support, and offer it in return. We can all play a part in supporting one another this way.
- 2. Plan a dinner or gift exchange that acknowledges everyone's contributions⁴.** Allow yourself to decorate, play music, share in your traditional foods, and foster inclusive holiday spirit in your workplace.
- 3. Be proactive around difficult conversations with family members⁶.** Prior to meeting with family or friends, collaboratively create and clearly communicate boundaries with everyone involved. Approach this as a joint effort intended not to stifle or avoid difficult conversations but rather to cultivate a warm and inviting environment for everyone. You can acknowledge that everyone holds different views, values, and desires, and that there is a time and place for those discussions that does not include holiday gatherings. One way to introduce these boundaries could be: "I know we all have strong opinions about what is going on in our country, and I want to propose that we do not engage in political discussions at our holiday gatherings. Doing so will help us focus our energy on what matters most in the moment — connecting with one another and having a good time."
- 4. Practice healthful conversation tactics⁶.** It can be easy to play fast and loose with our words, and during the holidays, this can hinder our ability to connect with others. Here are a few skills for healthfully fostering conversation:

Avoid extreme language characterized by words such as "always," "never," and "impossible." Be mindful of when you use them yourself and model that same reflection process for everyone else.

Use "I"-based language rather than "you"-based language, which can often be threatening or accusatory. However, pay attention when using "I feel" when describing a thought, such as, "I feel like things are really tense right now." Make sure to express emotions with "I am feeling..." and thoughts with "I think..."

Check your understanding. If you hear something that sounds offensive or combative, give your family member or friend the opportunity to "save face" by asking, "I think I misunderstood. Can you please help me better understand what you mean?"

- 5. Balance relationship efforts with your own self-respect⁶.** A core component of maintaining relationships is maintaining nurturing relationships. Sometimes, we might realize that a relationship is not nurturing us. It is okay to step away for a bit. This is a practice we can and should employ throughout our lives — not necessarily only during the holidays. When engaging in conversation with someone, ask yourself if the relationship is one you want to prioritize in that moment and, if so, what you can do to maintain it. Let that judgment be your guiding light. And if you find that the relationship is jeopardizing your self-respect, ask yourself how you want to feel about yourself in the context of the relationship — who you want to be in that conversation — and what actions you can take to be that person.

Navigating Expectations

Expectations are one of the biggest sources of stress, as it is often the pressure to meet expectations and the guilt of unmet expectations that weigh on us. These expectations come from all aspects of our lives: professional expectations from colleagues and patients, familial expectations, and social expectations from friends and our community.

- 1. Accept that you are working during the holidays⁴.** This is not a glamorous tip, but a useful one. Many health care professionals will be working long hours during the holiday season. And although we recognize organizational changes that need to occur to manage these demands, in the moment, it helps to embrace the responsibilities and time commitments before us. It can also help to focus on the rewards and personal accomplishments that come with working in health care². You have likely grown and matured in several ways in your career and cultivated many positive relationships with patients and colleagues alike.
- 2. Do not take on additional responsibilities you know you cannot handle⁴.** We all have limits and feel pressured to surpass them. We encourage and support you in setting your limits. Feel empowered to say “no” to voluntary requests; you do not need to bake three pies for a Christmas party simply because you did last year. One will do! Health care workers have a habit of signing up for extra responsibilities, shifts, and tasks; the allure of extra pay or benefits is hard to ignore as many of us see them as a service to bring greater joy to your friends and family⁵. The truth, though, is that real joy is cultivated through the relationships themselves. It is okay to take a financial hit in order to increase your time with people who matter.
- 3. Talk with others about expectations and what you can all do, especially at work, to minimize and offset expectations for extra work, shifts, gifts, and financial givings³.** To that last point, finances are one of the biggest stressors of the season. Rather than take on extra shifts to meet an ever-bloating budget, make a realistic budget that respects your personal health, too⁴. Allow yourself to be “good enough” with your contributions and push back against the norm that you must provide a gift or service worth “X” dollars.
- 4. Practice curiosity and transparency about your traditions with friends, family, and colleagues.** If you practice religious holidays, lean on your spiritual community to help support your engagement with those practices¹. Invite along others that also engage in those practices. And watch for those friends, family members, and colleagues who do not observe the same traditions as you do⁵. Reach out and invite them to collaboratively find ways you can all celebrate your respective holidays together!

References

1. The Pediatric Mental Health Institute. (Retrieved 2021, November 22). *Provider Resiliency and Managing Stress During the Holidays*. Children's Hospital Colorado. <https://www.childrenscolorado.org/doctors-and-departments/departments/psych/mental-health-professional-resources/primary-care-articles/provider-resiliency-during-holidays/>
2. Magaletta, Philip. R. (2020, December 14). *Successfully Coping with Holiday Stress: Strategies for Health Care Workers*. Health.mil. <https://health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/Clinicians-Corner-Blog/Successfully-Coping-with-Holiday-Stress-Strategies-for-Health-Care-Workers>
3. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2021, November 9). *Recognizing Holiday Triggers of Trauma*. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/recognizing-holiday-triggers>
4. Bankers Healthcare Group (2014, December 17). *The 12-Hour Shifts of Christmas: Managing Holiday Stress in the Healthcare Profession*. BHG. <https://bankershealthcaregroup.com/blog/12-hour-shifts-christmas-managing-holiday-stress-healthcare-profession/>
5. Cornell, Alisha. (2019, December 10). *5 Ways Healthcare Workers Can Manage Holiday Stress*. Relias. <https://www.relias.com/blog/5-ways-healthcare-workers-can-manage-holiday-stress>
6. Harris, Marina. (2021, November 11). *How to Survive Political Conversations Over the Holidays*. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/letters-your-therapist/202111/how-survive-political-conversations-over-the-holidays>