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Top 5 Holiday Stress Busters

by Rebecca Webber
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Feeling frazzled? Here are five tips to bring you — and your grandchild — calm amid the chaos.

As much as the end result can radiate joy, preparations leading up to the holiday celebration can, at times, make us want to pull our hair out. Now that the Thanksgiving turkey has been picked clean, we have fewer than five weeks to shop, decorate, bake, wrap, send cards, celebrate, visit, and ring in the New Year.


Yes, the to-do list just lengthened exponentially and one glance at it may leave you feeling overwhelmed. And your grandchild, what with the school plays, choir practices, and gift swaps is likely swamped, as well. But if stress strikes, do all you can to tame it. More than just a mood-wrecker, stress can harm your health. It reduces artery diameter by 35 percent, raising your risk for heart attack and stroke. On the bright side, laughter can increase artery diameter by 22 percent. Here are quick and easy stress-busting techniques from the experts to make your holiday cheer unshakable.

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Get Your Zzz's

You'll be well equipped to handle the holiday chaos if you're well-rested; you'll be irritable and anxious if you're not. It's a myth that people require less sleep as they grow older. "Sleep is a personal thing. Some people require more than others," says Dr. Stephen Rosenberg, a Philadelphia-based psychotherapist. Look back over your life history to see what your sleep pattern is, suggests Rosenberg, and stick to what makes you feel best — six to eight hours nightly keeps most adults refreshed and alert.

If you or your grandchild can't unwind after a hectic day, "try a bowl of oatmeal," says Rosenberg. "It will help you feel tired." Still feeling sleep-deprived and frazzled by mid-afternoon? Slip into your bedroom for a 30-minute nap and hang a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door. A study from the National Institute of Mental Health found that sleepers who anticipate a disturbance don't release prolactin, which is associated with deep relaxation.

Work It Out

Whether you hop on a bike, go to a yoga class, or just take the stairs, exercise is one of the most effective stress-relievers out there — and it will jump-start your energy. Plus, your grandchild will eagerly join in this type of playtime with you. Take it outdoors to reap extra benefits from exposure to sunlight and proximity to nature. "A brisk 30-minute walk a day is one of the best habits we can cultivate," says Dr. Tian Dayton, clinical psychologist and author of *Getting in the Christmas Spirit* (hitting shelves in December). "It can elevate our moods, keep us fit, control weight, and relieve depression."

Hint: Exercise works best when combined with purposeful activity, so walk with your dog, your best friend, or take your grandchildren to the park. Making your workout a social activity doubles its benefits.

Pump Up the Volume

Music can have a magical effect on mood — as long as the playlist includes tunes you love. Sadly, the jingles streaming through the mall, whatever's blaring from your car radio, and (naturally) hold music, may only increase your stress. But pop in your ear buds and choose songs you like and you'll boost your body's production of serotonin and endorphins. Start singing along and strengthen your immune system by 240 percent. So, fire up your MP3 player, dust off your favorite CDs, or pop in one of your grandchild's playful ditties. As the tunes flow in, you'll literally feel the stress flow out.

Repeat Calming Mantras

Choose a word to define your holiday season; try abundance, forgiveness, or happiness. Make it fit your circumstances this year. Then, "keep coming back to it in times of stress," says Dr. Kathleen Hall, founder of *the Stress Institute* in Atlanta. "It will give you an anchor so you don't lose your way." If you're hosting your family, including your six grandchildren, for Christmas dinner, try the word acceptance. If the turkey dries out, your son gets drunk, or your grandchildren break the ornament your husband gave you back when you were dating, repeat the word acceptance to yourself. "Tell yourself, 'No matter what happens, I'm going to accept it. There is purpose in it,'" says Hall.

A positive affirmation can work the same way. Try: 'I am in control', or, 'I am strong.' Sure, you may feel silly repeating these words at first, but doing so can train your brain to believe the message. "People who do this produce less cortisol when stressed," explains Hall.

Take a "Time-In"

When your grandchildren become overly rambunctious — say they're insisting that your pet poodle play pony with them — they might get a time-out. Time-ins, however, are for grandparents (and perhaps, cranky poodles?) who may need a little recharging time alone.

"Sit still, drink a cup of tea, write in your journal, or just take a few focused breaths, whatever activity or non-activity helps you collect yourself," says Abby Seixas, a mental health counselor and author of *Finding the Deep River Within* (Jossey-Bass, 2006). "Just five minutes a day will help you draw on your inner resources to deal with stressful situations." This bustling time of year is when you most need to set aside time for renewing yourself from the inside out, says Seixas. But while taking daily time-ins may be most beneficial now, this may be a good habit to maintain long after the holiday craze has fizzled.

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TOP

How would you rate your holiday stress during the holiday season?

- A. LOW: I start early, go with the flow.
- B. MEDIUM: Give those carols a rest!
- C. HIGH: Too many folks to try to please

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