

Tips for Reducing Holiday Stress

This season, shorten your list of holiday to-dos and relax your inner Martha.

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Denise McVey knows holiday stress all too well. To be sure, she loves the holidays: going caroling, shopping, buying cards, enjoying the first snow, and, most of all, loving the look of delight on her toddler's face on Christmas morning. But as the days until the holidays dwindle and the lines at the mall get longer, McVey is so beset by season-induced stress that, when the New Year rolls around, she's spent. "Colds, flu, you name it, every year I get it; I've had shingles eight times," says the 40-year-old owner of a creative agency in Boonton, N.J.

Why do many people feel so much more stress at this time of year? We tend to blame worsening traffic, crowded malls, and incessant commercials pushing holiday consumption, but a key culprit is our own memories, according to Ronald Nathan, PhD, clinical professor at Albany Medical College in New York. "When we think about the holidays, we dwell on the past and what went wrong, or we romanticize it and make it impossible to re-create," he says.

He counsels people to carefully examine their thoughts and expectations, and not drive themselves crazy finding "the perfect gift" or planning "the perfect party." "Instead," he says, "lower your expectations, and overestimate -- rather than underestimate -- your time."

Stress and the immune system

Easing up on yourself over the holidays is important because the connection between stress and illness is real, says Simon A. Rego, PsyD, an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and associate director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y.

"The controversy that stress causes disease is pretty much over. We're now teasing out how stress does it," he says. In fact, a new study explains how stress may weaken the immune system. Each cell contains a tiny "clock" called a telomere, which shortens each time the cell divides. To counter this effect, the body also produces an enzyme, telomerase, which protects the cell and prevents further shortening by adding more DNA to the end of the telomere.

So far, so good -- but under stress, the body pumps out cortisol, a hormone that suppresses this protective enzyme. The study found that people under chronic stress have shorter telomeres, which, researchers say, means they are more vulnerable to a host of ailments.

Health effects of stress

How to reduce the wear, tear, and misery that holiday stress can inflict? When your holiday to-do list stretches longer than Santa Claus's beard, eliminate whatever is unnecessary. Doing so may reduce your risk of:

- Heart disease, including heart attacks
- Skin conditions, including psoriasis and shingles
- Digestive disorder flare-ups, such as symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, and Crohn's disease
- Immune disorders, including flare-ups of multiple sclerosis and lupus
- Anxiety, depression, and insomnia
- Worsening pain, if you already have a pain disorder such as arthritis, back pain, and muscle spasms

As for McVey, she's paring down her holiday expectations. "I'm planning to take a day off, head into Manhattan, and enjoy the Christmas atmosphere."