How to Enjoy the Holidays with a Sense of Balance

The holiday season is in full swing. For many of us, the holidays mean increased activities and demands on our time. Some of these are certainly enjoyable, like visiting with favorite friends and family members, giving and receiving gifts, and sampling our favorite holiday treats. Others are a bit more stressful and a lot less fun, like fighting crowds, worrying about money, overindulging in food and drink, and dragging ourselves to various obligatory social functions.

The ads are full of images of happy people who seem to be reveling in the spirit of the season, surrounded by friends and loved ones. If our experience of this time of year doesn’t match these images, it’s easy to feel out of step with the world, as if there is something wrong with us. The holidays are often times when people get together with family. While this can be wonderful, it can also be stressful and challenging. For those of us who have lost loved ones during the year, the holidays can be a time of renewed grief.

For so many reasons, the holiday season can be stressful and when we are stressed, we need to take extra care to be sure we are coping with our stress in the best ways possible. When stress gets the best of us, we can fall victim to less than perfect means of coping. What follows are a few tips for an easier and, hopefully, more enjoyable holiday season.

Decide Your Limits - Don't Over Schedule
The holiday season is a time of parties and other social gatherings. Remember that you don't have to do it all. Figure out what you truly desire versus what you feel obligated to do. Focus the majority of your energy and time on activities that you really enjoy and do your best to limit or avoid those activities that are less enjoyable. Your happiness is an important consideration in planning how you spend your time.

Be Responsible about Food and Alcohol Consumption
Do your best to stick with healthy eating choices and responsible drinking. Moderation is the key, especially with holiday treats and alcohol. Many of us succumb to the pressure to overeat and/or drink to excess during the holidays. Try to stay within your usual guidelines for healthy eating and responsible drinking. Be sure to designate a sober driver when you are going out to party. Drink plenty of water to remain hydrated.

Simplify Travel
Travel can be especially stressful during the holiday season. If you have to travel, do what you can to make it as easy as possible on yourself. Try to get direct flights or, at least, minimize the number of stops along the way. You'll avoid the stress of having to rush from one plane to the next, or having to wait around for long periods of time.
Limit Car Time
Many people complain about spending too much time in the car during the holiday season - driving from one gathering to the next in an effort to see everyone. This can be exhausting. If you can, pick one or two places you truly desire to be. Setting healthy limits and keeping a reasonable schedule will make your life easier.

Make a Budget and Stick by It
The holidays are a time of gift giving. This can be a lot of fun, but it can also be financially stressful. Do your best to make a budget and stay within the spending limits that you have set. You're not obligated to spend beyond your means and you will very likely regret it if you do.

Limit Your Shopping Destinations and/or Shop Online
Make your shopping list conform to an easy schedule. Unless you really love shopping and have a lot of extra time on your hands, consider limiting your shopping to one or two stores where you can get a variety of gifts for the people on your list. Another option is to shop online. Point, click and all your gifts are delivered to your home - neatly wrapped. Online shopping is a great way to send gifts to loved ones far away. You get to avoid the crowds and long lines at the post office, and you can shop wherever and whenever you have access to the Internet.

Keep it Simple and Be Creative
Even a small gift lets people know you cherish them. Bigger is not necessarily better. Consider making gifts, instead of buying. Thoughtful handmade gifts and homemade goodies are often appreciated, and the process of preparing them can become a fun holiday tradition for you.

Take Time for Yourself
Consider giving yourself the gift of time during the holidays. Take a break from the rushing around, the shopping, the cooking, and the cleaning. Take time out to read a good book, watch your favorite movie, go for a bike ride, or take a nap.

Enjoy Family
While it can be enjoyable to see family during the holidays, some people find extended family time to be stressful. Do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself. If necessary, take a break from the gathering. Go for a walk. Call someone you really enjoy talking to. Take some alone time, if you need it.

Don't Forget Routine Maintenance
Get plenty of sleep, eat regularly, and exercise. Get a massage, meditate, and don't forget to breathe.

If you find that the holiday season is overwhelming you or getting you down, please consider reaching out for help to your primary care physician and/or the internal resources that follow.

Resources:
UCDHS Academic & Staff Assistance Program (ASAP): (916) 734-2727
UC Davis Counseling and Psychological Services for Students (CAPS): (530) 752-0871
UC Davis Residents/Fellows Support Program (Maggie Rea, Ph.D.): (916) 734-0676