

Take Control of Your Time, Health and Future this Holiday Season

The holiday season can be a stressful and overwhelming time for many people. In addition to increased financial pressures and family or social obligations, as the New Year approaches many of us must acknowledge that we didn't achieve the goals we set last year for making positive changes in our lives. Each January, we promise ourselves that this is the year we will really follow through on those resolutions to improve areas of our life, from our health to our career to our personal relationships. But without clear goals, and steps in place to attain those goals, it can be difficult to successfully achieve meaningful, lasting changes in our busy and demanding lives.

One approach that can help us break out of the annual rut of broken resolutions is positive psychology, which focuses on using your strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and cultivate well-being. Incorporating positive psychology techniques in your daily routine can be an effective and valuable way to address feelings of stress or anxiety and stay committed to your goals of making healthy improvements in your life.

Stress, anxiety and other mental health challenges affect people from all walks of life regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic level. Positive psychology offers tools anyone can use to start improving their mental health and well-being today. It can help us expand our focus from clinical problems to cultivate feelings of well-being for a life filled with meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment.

Positive psychology offers strategies to help people manage life's challenges, maintain a healthy outlook and

recognize opportunities for enjoyment. These techniques are valuable tools that can promote mental health, increase resiliency and add balance to your life. Anyone can use positive psychology to help manage holiday-related stress and anxiety and stay on track toward personal goals by following these simple tips:



Unplug. Stay present, calm, and positive during this year's holidays by building some "down time" into your day during which you switch off your mobile device, computer and television. Not only will this help you relax and recharge, but you will be able to better focus on the people and things around you.

Set realistic goals that fit your schedule and budget. This is a great time of year to take stock of your goals and accomplishments and create a step-by-step plan to help you achieve greater control and fulfillment in the year ahead.

Keep the momentum going! Stay inspired by keeping a daily account of your hard work and progress. Cross goals — large and small — off your list as you

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accomplish them. Develop a motto that inspires you and keeps you focused even after the glow of the holidays has faded to avoid backsliding into unhealthy habits. Something like, "I can do it" or "All great journeys start with one step".



Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you're feeling overwhelmed this holiday season, remember there are people out there who are ready and available to help. Talk to a friend, family member or someone else you trust and feel comfortable asking for assistance. If you or someone you know needs immediate help, call your local crisis line for assistance. These local resources often offer free, confidential support and referrals related to a variety of needs, including suicide prevention, crisis intervention, community resources, mental health referrals, and alcohol and drug support services. If you don't know your local crisis line, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for immediate help.

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The Holiday Blues

The holiday season is here. Lights are up, shoppers are out, parties are on, relatives are here, and everyone seems cheery — almost everyone. Holidays can bring a mixed bag of emotions.

For many it is a joyful time to reunite with friends and family and revel in holiday festivities. For others, though, it can be a time full of grief. While it may seem everyone in the world is feeling happy and joyous, some are not.

The holiday blues are, unfortunately, extremely common. They affect men and women, young and old, and range from mild sadness to severe depression. They can be the result of simple pressures or expectations that accompany the holidays, such as gift buying, decorating, meal preparations, or concern over a big family gathering. They can also be caused by loneliness, sadness, or grief over someone who is no longer here.

The holidays can be a tough time for people who are grieving or coming to terms with loss in their lives. Not only the death of a loved one — although that type of loss can certainly be intensified during the holidays — but simply being away from people that are cared about can be a source of upset. Distance from loved ones, for example, can become a focus during the holidays as memories of times spent together are recalled and the separation highlighted.

Cultural expectations can also contribute to the holiday blues. Expectations can be a significant source of upset when they cannot be met or if the individual does not necessarily agree with them. For example, as we are inundated with images of "holiday cheer" through television, print, and radio advertisements, what is someone to do if they can't "get into the spirit"? Those individuals not in sync with holiday expectations of joyfulness can begin to think something is wrong with them. This thought process can operate as an emotional double whammy for the individual, who may have legitimate reasons for feeling less than joyful in the first place (i.e., loss or separation), and are surrounded by reminders that he or she is not happy like everyone else. This can also be a difficult time for those who do not recognize a particular holiday for personal or religious beliefs.

There can be a physiological component to holiday depression, too. Some people annually experience the "winter blues," or what is clinically known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Approximately 11 million people

are diagnosed with SAD, and women are four times more likely to suffer from it than men. SAD results from fewer hours of sunlight as the days grow shorter during the winter months. Many people feel mildly depressed during the winter. Some people, however, have more severe bouts of feeling down, low energy, difficulty with sleep and appetite, loss of interest in activities, and reduced concentration to the point where they have problems functioning at work or at home. Other common symptoms of SAD include oversleeping, extreme fatigue, increased appetite with carbohydrate craving, overeating, and weight gain. With more severe episodes, people may have suicidal thoughts.

Research has shown that many patients with SAD improve with exposure to bright, artificial light, called light therapy, or phototherapy. As little as 30 minutes a day sitting under a special fluorescent light box can result in significant improvement in 60% to 70% of SAD patients.

In addition to the above scenarios, a post-holiday letdown may also occur. This can result from emotional disappointments during the holiday months, a lack of activities following such an eventful time, as well as physical responses to excess fatigue, stress, and consumption. Holiday blues may continue into the New Year, and if coupled with SAD, through the winter months.

Tips for Coping

There are three Cs of coping for those who suffer from holiday blues:

- Choose
- Communicate
- Compromise

Make choices about what you want to do. Communicate those choices to people around you. If your choices could cause other people grief, try to compromise and find a middle ground.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Psychological Association, and the National Mental Health Association offer these additional tips to help prevent holiday blues:

- Establish realistic goals and expectations for the holiday season, and do not count on the holidays to replace problems. Try to remember holidays do not prevent or insulate one from sadness or loneliness.
- Limit your consumption of alcohol. As a general rule of thumb, moderate consumption of most things is helpful. Try to distinguish between celebrating and consuming.

- Recognize that you don't have to feel festive and do not force yourself to express feelings that are not there. If you have recently experienced a distressing situation, honor your needs by addressing the issue and, if appropriate, communicate your needs to others.
- If financial issues are contributing to holiday stress, know your spending limit and stick to it. Explore holiday activities that are free, such as driving around to look at holiday decorations. Go window-shopping with a friend and enjoy their company rather than buying something.
- Express your feelings to those around you in a constructive, honest, and open way.



If someone you know is experiencing holiday blues:

- Try to involve that person in holiday activities in an engaging, non-forceful manner.
- Be available to listen. If individuals express hopelessness or worthlessness, be supportive. Communicate you are there for them and are willing to help, even if that means seeking professional help.
- If people express suicidal thoughts, take them seriously. Familiarize yourself with resources such as mental health centers, counseling centers and hotlines.

Overall, it can be helpful to be aware that holidays can be difficult for people, especially when reality doesn't measure up to expectations. Support and understanding can go a long way and it seems particularly appropriate during the holiday season to focus on love and care for those around us.

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Healthy Role Model for Children: 10 Tips for Setting Healthy Examples

You are the most important influence on your child. You can do many things to help your children develop healthy eating habits for life. Offering a variety of foods helps children get the nutrients they need from every food group. They will also be more likely to try new foods and to like more foods. When children develop a taste for many types of foods, it's easier to plan family meals. Cook together, eat together, talk together, and make mealtime a family time!

1. **Teach by example.** Eat vegetables, fruits, and whole grains with meals or as snacks. Let your child see that you like to munch on raw vegetables.

2. **Go food shopping together.** Grocery shopping can teach your child about food and nutrition. Discuss where vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy, and protein foods come from. Let your children make healthy choices.

3. **Get creative in the kitchen.** Cut food into fun and easy shapes with cookie cutters. Name a food your child helps make. Serve "Janie's Salad" or "Jackie's Sweet Potatoes" for dinner. Encourage your child to invent new snacks. Make your own trail mixes from dry whole-grain, low-sugar cereal and dried fruit.

4. **Offer the same foods for everyone.** Stop being a "short-order cook" by making different dishes to please children. It's easier to plan family meals when everyone eats the same foods.

5. **Reward with attention, not food.** Show your love with hugs and kisses. Comfort with hugs and talks. Choose not to offer sweets as rewards. It lets your child think sweets or dessert foods are better than other foods. When meals are not eaten, kids do not need "extras" — such as candy or cookies — as replacement foods.

6. **Focus on each other at the table.** Talk about fun and happy things at mealtime. Turn off the television. Take phone calls later. Try to make eating meals a stress-free time.

7. **Listen to your child.** If your child says he or she is hungry, offer a small, healthy snack — even if it is not a

scheduled time to eat. Offer choices. Ask "Which would you like for dinner: broccoli or cauliflower?" instead of "Do you want broccoli for dinner?"

8. **Limit screen time.** Allow no more than 2 hours a day of screen time like TV and computer games. Get up and move during commercials to get some physical activity.

9. **Encourage physical activity.** Make physical activity fun for the whole family. Involve your children in the planning. Walk, run, and play with your child — instead of sitting on the sidelines. Set an example by being physically active and using safety gear, like bike helmets.

10. **Be a good food role model.** Try new foods yourself. Describe its taste, texture, and smell. Offer one new food at a time. Serve something your child likes along with the new food. Offer new foods at the beginning of a meal, when your child is very hungry. Avoid lecturing or forcing your child to eat.

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Your employee assistance program offers confidential help for personal problems

and concerns. Concerned about a troubled family member who won't get help? Feel tired and exhausted, but don't know if it's burnout, loss of motivation, depression or all three? Late for work too often? Has use of alcohol or drugs created a crisis you are facing right now? The bottom line, never wonder if your concern is appropriate to contact OEAP. So, if you've been putting off taking action to solve a serious issue that is weighing on you, give OEAP a call today.

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