

Managing Seasonal Stress:

AN UNWELCOME HOLIDAY GUEST

by Kelly Broadwater, LPA, LPC, CEDS

The holiday season is upon us! THE END OF THE YEAR CAN BE A TIME OF MUCH JOY AND CELEBRATION, OR IT CAN BE A TIME OF INCREASED STRESS AND UNWANTED BEHAVIOR. SOME OF THE MAIN CONTRIBUTORS TO HOLIDAY STRESS INCLUDE:

- **EXCESS DEMANDS ON YOUR SCHEDULE** – The hustle and bustle of the season includes extra time being devoted to activities such as shopping, travel, holiday parties, family get-togethers, etc. These seasonal priorities can easily detract from your usual routine, quality time with family and friends, exercise and even sleep! In addition, taking time off from work for the holidays may cause your job demands to become compressed into a smaller timeframe, which in turn increases stress levels and feelings of burnout.
- **DIFFICULT FAMILY DYNAMICS** – Not everyone enjoys the blessings of family peace and harmony. Holidays are oftentimes the only time of year that extended families gather together, and with that can come unrealistic expectations regarding family behaviors and roles. Family members that are in conflict with each other may feel obligated to “make nice.” However, holding in negative feelings only leads to increased stress and anxiety. In contrast, family conflict may erupt and create chaos, leaving family members feeling hurt and angry.
- **FINANCIAL WOES** – Travel, gift giving, party planning and lost wages due to time off from work can all bust one’s budget. Being in debt and anticipating how to bail yourself out in the new year can leave you feeling financially and emotionally frazzled!
- **THE PRESSURE OF CREATING PICTURE-PERFECT HOLIDAYS** – In what I refer to as the “Martha Stewart Syndrome,” holidays can create a competitive drive to go above and beyond – thus fulfilling all of the seasonal expectations placed upon us. The desire to have the best and brightest light display, perfectly set table, handmade gifts with carefully selected wrapping paper and matching bows, Norman Rockwell-esque photo card and exquisitely decorated home can zap you out of your time and energy, causing you to neglect your own needs.
- **END OF THE YEAR BLUES** – An estimated 10 to 20 percent of recurrent depression cases follow a seasonal pattern with fall/winter depression being the most prominent. A variety of biological factors may contribute to this, but if you are already prone to depression, the shorter days, cold temperatures and stress of the holidays can leave you feeling totally depleted.
- **PHYSICAL HEALTH SUFFERS DURING THIS TIME OF YEAR AS WELL!** – Not only is the flu more common in fall and winter months, but so are heart attacks, strokes, high cholesterol, psoriasis and weight gain. According to a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, people gain a small but significant amount of weight throughout the holiday season, which is then maintained throughout the course of the year.



THERE ARE ALSO SPECIFIC STRATEGIES TO EMPLOY TO HELP COMBAT HOLIDAY-RELATED OVEREATING, EMOTIONAL EATING AND WEIGHT GAIN:

- **BEWARE OF BITES, LICKS AND TASTES (BLTs)** – It can be tempting to grab a treat sitting out in the break room, take a piece of candy off a coworker’s desk, help yourself to a pinch here or there when baking, etc. However, all of those “BLTs” can add up with a cumulative effect that is harmful to your waistline.
- **PREPARE FOR PARTIES** – Don’t go to events hungry – this can set you up to overindulge. If it’s a potluck, take something healthy. Have one small plate versus going back over and over again or continuously grazing throughout the course of the event.
- **DON’T SKIP MEALS** – Trying to “save up” your calories for a big meal or party can lead to overeating or even binging.
- **MONITOR YOUR INTAKE** – Use MyFitnessPal or one of the many other apps available to help you track what you eat and drink. This can keep you mindful of your nutritional needs and goals. It may also be a tool for helping you plan in advance so that you enjoy the festivities without exceeding your calorie budget.
- **ENGAGE IN ACTIVITY** – Set aside time for working out rather than abandoning your exercise regimen with the attitude of “I’ll get back to it in the new year.” Sign the family up for a Turkey Trot or Jingle Jog. Enjoy fall and wintertime outdoor activities such as ice skating or skiing.
- **FIND NON-FOOD RELATED WAYS TO CELEBRATE** – Be creative in how you spread holiday cheer. For example, instead of a cookie exchange, get together with neighbors to decorate ornaments or wreaths. Go caroling with your family. Have a game night where everyone brings their favorite game instead of a potluck where everyone brings their favorite dish.
- **SEEK HEALTHY OUTLETS FOR YOUR EMOTIONS** – If you find stress or negative emotions causing you to reach for food, ask yourself “What am I really needing right now?” Maybe it’s a nap, a hug or time to connect with a friend. Engage in creative or energizing activities. Journal or talk to a trusted confidante or counselor.





“Research has shown that Americans eat an average of 619 extra calories per day from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day.”

Research has shown that Americans eat an average of 619 extra calories per day from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day. Increased access to food during the holiday season, coupled with stress, can be a recipe for emotional eating. Overindulging in food and alcohol can further perpetuate stress levels by creating body image dissatisfaction, disrupting sleep patterns and causing feelings of guilt and shame.

Take a Stand Against Stress

The good news is that there are things you can do to inoculate yourself against the physical and emotional tolls that stress can take during this time of year.

- **LEARN TO SAY NO** – Setting limits is important. Don’t stretch yourself too thin by overcommitting to too many holiday events! Make sure that you’re checking in with yourself about your actual desire to accept invitations and consulting your schedule before taking on more projects, parties or other obligations. It’s better to devote more time and energy to something you are really looking forward to than to be half-heartedly showing up for a multitude of commitments you aren’t truly excited about.
- **SPEND QUALITY TIME WITH THE PEOPLE WHO MATTER MOST** – Just because you are biologically related to someone doesn’t mean you have to spend time around chaotic or toxic family members. It is okay to politely decline invites to large gatherings or let your loved ones know you want to keep holiday events low-key this year.

- **STICK TO A BUDGET** – Again, planning is key. Look at what you have to spend on holiday expenses and don’t feel pressured to go beyond your means. One idea is for family members to draw names for gift exchanging rather than for everyone to feel obligated to provide presents for everyone else, which can really add up.
- **MAKE TIME FOR SELF-CARE** – Prioritize yourself and don’t let things you normally do to take care of yourself fall by the wayside. Pencil in time for self-care (including exercise) like it is an appointment that can’t be broken!
- **DON’T TRY TO DO IT ALL** – Make choices about what is really important to you and let go of Pinterest-fueled perfectionism in regards to planning, decorating, shopping and so forth. Focus on your meaning for the season and be mindful of a few things that make it special. Remind yourself that it’s okay to keep it simple!
- **SEEK EXTRA SUPPORT** – If you battle with the end-of-the-year blues, consult with a professional and assess whether you need counseling. Low vitamin D can also be a culprit to a seasonally low mood, so make sure you get your levels checked. If you already take an antidepressant medication, talk to your doctor about whether it needs to be adjusted.

Following through with self-care, stress management and healthy habits during this busy time of year will set you up to start your new year off on the right foot. Cheers to a joyous holiday season!

About the Author:

Kelly Broadwater, LPA, LPC, CEDS, is the founding co-executive director of The Chrysalis Center for Counseling & Eating Disorder Treatment. As a psychologist and certified eating disorders specialist who is an expert in bariatric psychology, Ms. Broadwater developed the comprehensive aftercare program for bariatric surgery patients offered at her outpatient practice. Her clinical experience includes conducting pre-operative psychological evaluations, providing pre- and post-operative individual counseling and facilitating group therapy for post-surgery patients. Ms. Broadwater frequently speaks on topics related to bariatrics, including co-presenting at the 2015 International Association of Eating Disorder Professionals conference on effective bariatric aftercare. She is an integrated health associate member of the American Society for Metabolic & Bariatric Surgery.





ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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