

Stress Proof your Holidays by Debbie Nesbitt

Can you really do that...stress proof THE holidays? You sure can, even if you can't keep from getting fruit cakes! (Sorry, if you like fruit cake. No offense intended!) I'd like to share with you four easy and simple ways you can stress proof your holidays and make them pleasant, fun and relaxing!

I'd like to begin with putting a few things on the 'holiday' table. It is not a matter of eliminating stressful situations during the holiday that we are after in this article. No one can change the traffic and check out lines at the mall the week before Christmas, right? And how many of us have had the experience of waiting at the airport for hours on end with small children because the airport is fogged in? Not to mention the flurry of cleaning that goes on right before company comes, effectively undoing in ten minutes what took you five hours to put in place. Ah, these are the things holidays are made of! And they are some of the very things that stress us out during the holidays! So, if we can't change the stressful situations, what can we change in order to stress proof our holidays?

Picture having a bank account (how appropriate for the holidays, huh!) that gives you resources to draw from when you find yourself in a stressful situation. As long as you have made deposits ahead of time, and your current withdrawal is within the resources you have available, all is well. Now what happens when you have not made any deposits in awhile and you continue to take out more and more until one day there is not enough to cover the withdrawal. Ouch! You get the picture. So what kind of things can you put in the "stress" bank ahead of time that will help you sail through the holidays stress free? Let's take a look!

MEDITATION

First of all, taking time out in the form of meditation does a mind and body good. Really, it does. Studies show that people who regularly meditate activate the relaxation response. They notice things like lower blood pressure, reduced respiration and heart rates, improved immune system function, more restful sleep, and have a greater sense of relaxation and well-being. And these results tend to go with them long after they have finished their meditation time. Now imagine, how holiday shopping would change if we all meditated before going to the mall for Christmas shopping!

If you are new to meditation here is an easy technique to begin with. Sit upright, take a few deep breaths from the abdomen and close your eyes. Then using a breathing pattern Dr. Andrew Weil recommends, breathe in deeply through your nose for the count of 4, hold for the count of 7, and exhale through your mouth for the count of 8. Do this pattern for a set of 4 working up to 8 sets. As you exhale, imagine just letting go of all you want to release at this moment, allowing your body to relax even more.

Now, as your body breathes naturally, focus your attention on your breathing. Really be mindful of what your breathing feels like, what it sounds like. Where do you feel it in your body? Be mindful of this moment, just breathing. As other thoughts drift into your awareness, just notice them, and let them go while you bring your attention back to your breathing. Do this for 10 minutes working up to 20 minutes a day.

To banish holiday stress I really encourage you to explore other styles and techniques of meditation! There are many good books available on meditation and one of my favorites is 'Meditation for Everyday Living' by Stephen Austin. It also includes a CD of meditation exercises.

BECOME A THOUGHT DETECTIVE

Changing the way you perceive stressful situations will definitely stress proof your holiday! So for this second deposit in the "stress" bank you really just need to ask your self two questions when faced with holiday stress.... "What is another way to look at this situation?" and after coming up with at least three alternatives, ask yourself "Which alternative perception will reduce stress now and in the future?"

When you look at a situation from several different angles it gives you the chance to choose what would now be an appropriate response. You have choices. Blowing your top is no longer mandatory. Holiday stress doesn't stand a chance when you have this new way of perceiving and thinking!

If you have trouble coming up with alternative perceptions I suggest you take a moment to express gratitude for something you really love. (In fact, this is a great thing to do any time you feel stressed!) Then ask your question again and see what comes up now!

EXERCISE

The third important deposit in the stress bank is exercise. Now when I say exercise I don't mean shopping, wrapping and baking. I'm referring to some kind of aerobic, stretching and strengthening activity. Make it fun, varied and sweat a little! Of course it is wise to check in with your doctor before you start up a regular program if you have not been active. There are also some good personal trainers in the area to help you design just the right program for you if you are new to this kind of thing. But whatever you choose, just do it at least 5-6 days a week working up to 30-45 minutes a day.

I could go on and on listing the virtues of exercise for reducing stress but a few that you actually might be interested in are: exercise trains the body how to react to stress more effectively thus lowering future stress reactivity, it improves

oxygenation and blood flow throughout the body and brain meaning it helps improve short term memory and who doesn't need that during the holidays. Exercise improves digestion and elimination (think Thanksgiving dinner!) and increases endurance, strength and coordination. Finally, exercise releases beta endorphins into our bodies that cause us to feel good. So what are you waiting for?

NUTRITION

Now for the fourth deposit in the "stress" bank. It is the N word...no it is not 'naughty' or 'nice'...it is 'nutrition'! The holidays are famous for all kinds of sweet treats, most of which rob you of energy and important nutrients. When holiday stress takes its toll you can bet it is also depleting your body's vitamin and mineral stores making it harder to handle stress effectively. This is really your first line of defense against holiday stress and most often overlooked.

So, to stress proof your holiday season start the day off with good nutrition including a good serving of protein. Make sure your protein sources are of good quality such as skinless chicken breasts, fish, protein drinks, nuts, eggs or low fat yogurt.

Be sure to have a well rounded diet including complex carbohydrates in the form of whole grains and lots of fruits and vegetables. Drink your Ovaltine...wait a minute...I meant water, at least 8 glasses that are 8 ounces each. Also, consider taking a good whole food multiple vitamin with minerals. Adding some extra B vitamins and vitamin C can also be a great stress buster. Check at your local health/nutrition store to get more information on which products are right for you.

Now does that mean you can't have any figgy pudding or pumpkin pie? Of course not, but use moderation. Think of it as the exception instead of the rule. (So that's where we went wrong!) Try fruit and nuts to snack on instead of cookies and candy. A deviled egg, apples dipped in peanut butter or Toby's soy pate on celery is out of this world for snack choices. Be creative, get lots of variety of fresh, natural, whole foods, and did I say to drink your water? Good!

As you make these deposits to the 'stress' bank this holiday season don't be surprised when your friends and family wonder what's up with you as you shop with a smile, relax with the family, actually enjoy the season and laugh at the traffic...well that might be taking it a bit too far...just start making your daily deposits to the "stress" bank now. It is truly amazing just how far your deposits of meditation, being a thought detective, exercise and nutrition will go. Happy (stress free) Holidays!

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