

Older and Wiser: Seniors can take these steps to reduce holiday stress

Christmas can be a stressful time for seniors. Here are some tips to help older adults stay healthy and happy during the holidays.

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Seniors should be mindful of the extra stresses that the holiday season can bring, and make sure they are taking steps to stay healthy and happy

I do not know about you, but for the first time in awhile I am excited about the holiday season this year.

After dealing with the constraints that COVID-19 put on us over the holiday season in the last few years, we may be back to enjoying more normal activity. Most of us are looking forward to a holiday season full of fun and joy, unshackled by the pandemic.

However, this time of year as I have noted in the past, can also be somewhat stressful as we try to meet all the expectations that go with the season. Ironically, the pandemic often forced us to cut back on our favourite activities because of masking, distancing and not being allowed to congregate in large groups. However, while this may have reduced some of the usual stresses of the season, it also increased loneliness and a sense of disconnectedness.

The holiday season is generally a time when we increase our activities in addition to performing our usual daily pursuits. This extra activity can increase our stress levels as we try to get everything done from buying gifts, baking, decorating inside and outside our home, going to get-togethers and more. It can also cause us to neglect our good habits such as exercise and maintaining a good diet. It is so hard to pass up the goodies and to take an extra walk after a high calorie dinner full of our favourite things.

Seniors may be more at risk for increased stress than a younger person, and this may affect our health. An article written in Harvard Women's Health Watch states that "while stress certainly isn't easy to manage at any age, it can become more difficult to cope as you get older."

The authors of the study suggest that an older person's body can't physically and mentally handle stress the same way it did when they were younger, stating that "signs of stress may mimic symptoms of memory loss or dementia or include appetite changes, headaches, anxiety, irritability, or trouble concentrating."

In addition to stress, some seniors commonly experience depression at this time of year as they revisit old memories and mourn the losses and change of times. For some seniors who are somewhat isolated, there is an increased sense that they might be missing out on the good things that others are enjoying.

As seniors, taking care of ourselves without getting stressed will again be a challenge after the pandemic's restrictions. How can we manage to navigate the holiday season so that it is enjoyable and fun? The Harvard Women's Health Watch article suggests that we can "manage stress by using relaxation techniques, getting involved in community activities, taking care of yourself, eating right, getting enough sleep, and sticking to other healthy habits."

It's always wise to pace yourself if you are overwhelmed by the addition of many events to join, cooking, or even attending big dinners with family and friends. Spending extra money for gifts and holiday goodies can be stressful when you are on a fixed income. As many of us are experiencing this year, the cost of everything has gone up. Taking time to plan with a strict budget might help. Not only spending the money can be stressful, but so is taking the time to shop in crazy busy malls. Ask yourself: Do you need the biggest tree on the lot? Does everyone need a personalized gift?

Taking care of our health means keeping up with regular sleep routines and maintaining our exercise programs despite the call of the mall. It also means sticking to your good eating habits in the face of the abundance of the holiday season. Try surveying the goodie tray and take only one or two special treats. Eat only at mealtimes and resist snacking, especially if you know you are going to have a big meal later.

Giving of yourself can reduce stress. Assist seniors you know who may be needing some support or extra social connection. Donate to a charity that serves people at this time of year. The food bank needs your support as do many of the organizations on the North Shore – see lists of charities in the 2022 Seniors Directory, which is found at your nearest seniors centre or at North Shore Community Services (call 604-982-3302) or the North Shore News at (604-998-3520).

Proper self-care is the gift you can give to yourself over this season. Try to take a few moments for yourself, take a nap or a bath, curl up with a good book, watch a new series on TV (or pick up a set at your local library) or chat with a friend.

Let's get back to a new holiday season "normal," but let's stay unstressed, feel the joy, and have fun.

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