



YOUR HEALTH & FITNESS

By Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D.

FOR SOME, HOLIDAY STRESS comes from the extra demands celebration and family time place on an already overloaded schedule. For others, it comes from disappointment that life is not the way it should be. Certain people are missing from the scene. We're lonely while everyone else is having fun. Traveling in messy weather, not enough money, too much to eat and drink. It's all too easy to forget the holiday season is a time for affirming commitment to friends, family, community and enjoying the pleasures of celebration. We get too busy and distracted to appreciate the true meaning of the holidays. Before we know it, they're over and we're exhausted.

Almost everyone experiences some extra stress during the holiday season. But contrary to popular opinion, stress can be stimulating and invigorating. Positive stress, called *eustress*, helps us rise to the occasion. Unless we get completely overloaded, *eustress* does not appear to cause the harmful health effects associated with *distress*.

Stress is not something that simply happens to us. We have a great deal of control over what causes us to feel stressed, and our stress response. There are many things we can do to improve our holiday cheer, and to maximize our enjoyment of this special time of year.

Prioritize goals and plan accordingly.

Take a few minutes to think about the holiday season. What are the important priorities? What really makes the season meaningful and special for you and your family? And what else absolutely has to get done despite the fact that the holidays are upon us? Sometimes there is simply not enough time to accomplish all we would like. Look for low-priority items that give you too little pleasure for the time required. Have you always spent hours baking 20 kinds of holiday treats because that was your family's tradition? Maybe one or two kinds will do. Maybe there would even be enough holiday treats around without your baking.

While you're thinking about holiday traditions, don't be afraid to add new ones that can be sources of meaning and pleasure for you and your family. Volunteer work with those who are less fortunate can be especially fulfilling during the holiday season.

Once you have your goals clearly in mind, break down each goal into "do-able" tasks, and schedule them into your days. Do the most important things first, and don't procrastinate. Streamline tasks whenever possible: One big shopping trip for groceries and other items will take less total time than lots of little trips. Organize a list, and check things off.

Well-designed daily plans based on clearly de-

Managing holiday stress

finied goals help you feel more in control, and a sense of control helps turn *distress* into *eustress*. Make schedules as realistic as possible. But keep in mind that schedules must be flexible to accommodate those inevitable, unexpected interruptions.

Create positive expectations and exercise your options.

Stress is often caused not so much by what is actually happening, but rather by our perception of what is happening. Think about a potentially stressful family gathering. Focus on the people you prefer not to see, their negative comments and opinions, what they might be saying about you, all the work involved in the preparation and clean up. Imagine you have no control over who will corner you in conversation, and that you must behave in some prescribed manner according to your role in the family. Are we having fun yet?

Now focus instead on the people you look forward to seeing, the questions you'd like to ask them, the good things to eat, the special family rituals. Pretend you are in your nineties looking back on your life. Think about the options available to you. Decide which people you will spend the most time with, and whom you will avoid. What are some things you could do to make the gathering as pleasant as possible? A walk with your favorite uncle? A shared confidence with a favorite cousin? Whatever you imagine, the secret to creation of *eustress* from potential *distress* lies in finding a meaningful perspective on the upcoming event and exercising your options.

Take time out to exercise and relax.

When there is a lot going on, we tend to cut out those activities that are so vital to recharging our energy and taking care of our health. Yet this is when we need those things the most. Exercise helps us relax and enjoy the day. It counterbalances the fight or flight stress response. Exercise programs can provide an anchor in the tumultuous holiday seas. □



Abby Peck



A sense of control helps turn distress into eustress.

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Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D., is Assistant Professor of Exercise and Sport Studies at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.