**When the Holidays Get You Down, Here’s How to Get Through Them**

Ah, the holidays. That delightful time of year when we all put aside our differences and peace on Earth prevails. *Or not*. While the time between New Year’s day and Halloween is fairly uneventful, we’re expected to put on a happy face from the stroke of midnight on the 305th day of the year until the week after Santa’s annual appearance. But when you have a mental health condition, such as anxiety, depression, or PTSD, that’s not always possible.

Here are a few tips on how to keep [holiday stress](http://blog.johnsonmemorial.org/dealing-with-the-most-stressful-time-of-the-year) at bay:

**Stop trying to meet everyone else’s expectations.** Live your life your way, especially at the holidays. You don’t have to set the perfect table, outdo the neighbor’s Christmas lights, or hide an assortment of organic, gluten-free, locally-sourced, tree-nut-free, kale-infused, fair trade treats in the kids’ stockings. A few oranges, an iTunes gift card, and box of Little Debbies is exactly the right thing if that’s what your family likes. The Jones can spend their time worrying about recreating a Rockwell at dinner while you’re enjoying your family.

**Ask for help.** When you have anxiety already, the thought of reaching out for help is scary at best. Fear of rejection or, worse, looking like you aren’t “enough” is enough to crush even the toughest of souls. All these bottled up feelings of inadequacy are stressful…more so than simply [asking for help](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/why-is-it-so-hard-to-ask-for-help-0616164), according to Laurie Leinwand, MA, LPC, a top contributor for GoodTherapy.org.

**Learn to love lists.** While you certainly don’t have to get everything done every day for everyone, you can more easily conquer the things you do have to do by keeping a list. [Lists](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-creativity-cure/201403/how-making-lists-can-quell-anxiety-and-breed-creativity) help us remove the things that don’t matter and allow our minds to focus on the things that do. And, having a way to keep track of our seasonal tasks can quell inner chaos and make life a little bit more manageable.

**Travel on your own time.** You don’t have to rush to reach your destination, despite grandma’s insistence. No one is going to start pushing up daisies if you arrive half an hour past turkey carving. If you know you just have to be there at a certain time, plan leave twice as early as you really need to and take the scenic route. It will give you a distraction along the way and you won’t feel restless and rushed.

**Work through your issues with past holidays.** Everyone has bad memories and, unfortunately, these often revolve around the holidays. Stress, [family conflict](http://truenorthbytomnorth.com/sadandbadmemorieschristmaspast/), loss, financial concerns…these are all valid issues that we have to face. But when those bad memories interfere with your ability to live in today and create future memories, it’s time to let them go. Don’t spend your time holding onto your sadness, fears, or anxiety about what happened last year, or even 20 years ago. It isn’t worth it and -- reality check -- there’s nothing you can do to change yesterday. Once you learn to let go, you can move forward without the emotional baggage.

**Enjoy today (or even just this moment to start with).** Letting go is just the first step. You also have to learn to enjoy the little things that are happening now. Right this moment. Are your bills paid? Kids tucked warmly in their beds. Did you get through Christmas dinner without anyone [choking](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5gjjnz/how-scared-should-i-be-of-choking-to-death-at-thanksgiving-206) to death? Great! These are all things to celebrate. More to the point, you have to stop and breathe in each moment that makes you feel at peace. Stress has a way of sneaking in when we focus on the negative things in life; shift your attention to the positive and you’ll notice a change in your stress levels.

**Swap the libations for real hydration.** During the holidays when everyone else is indulging, keep your senses straight by sipping water instead of wine. Drinking too much can actually trigger more [stress](https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/AA85/AA85.htm) in the long run than it alleviates.

**Snuggle with your dog (yes, really!).** Quick. Look at a picture of a cute puppy. Go ahead, this blog can wait. Ok, you smiled a little, didn’t you? Now, if you have your own furry friend, move to the couch and offer a warm lap. Not only do dogs improve our mood, keep us moving, and improve our social lives, pets can help our hearts stay strong and alleviate stress. And if that wasn’t enough, your [dog](https://www.rover.com/blog/6-incredible-health-benefits-dog/) might save your life one day, according to the dog people at Rover.com.

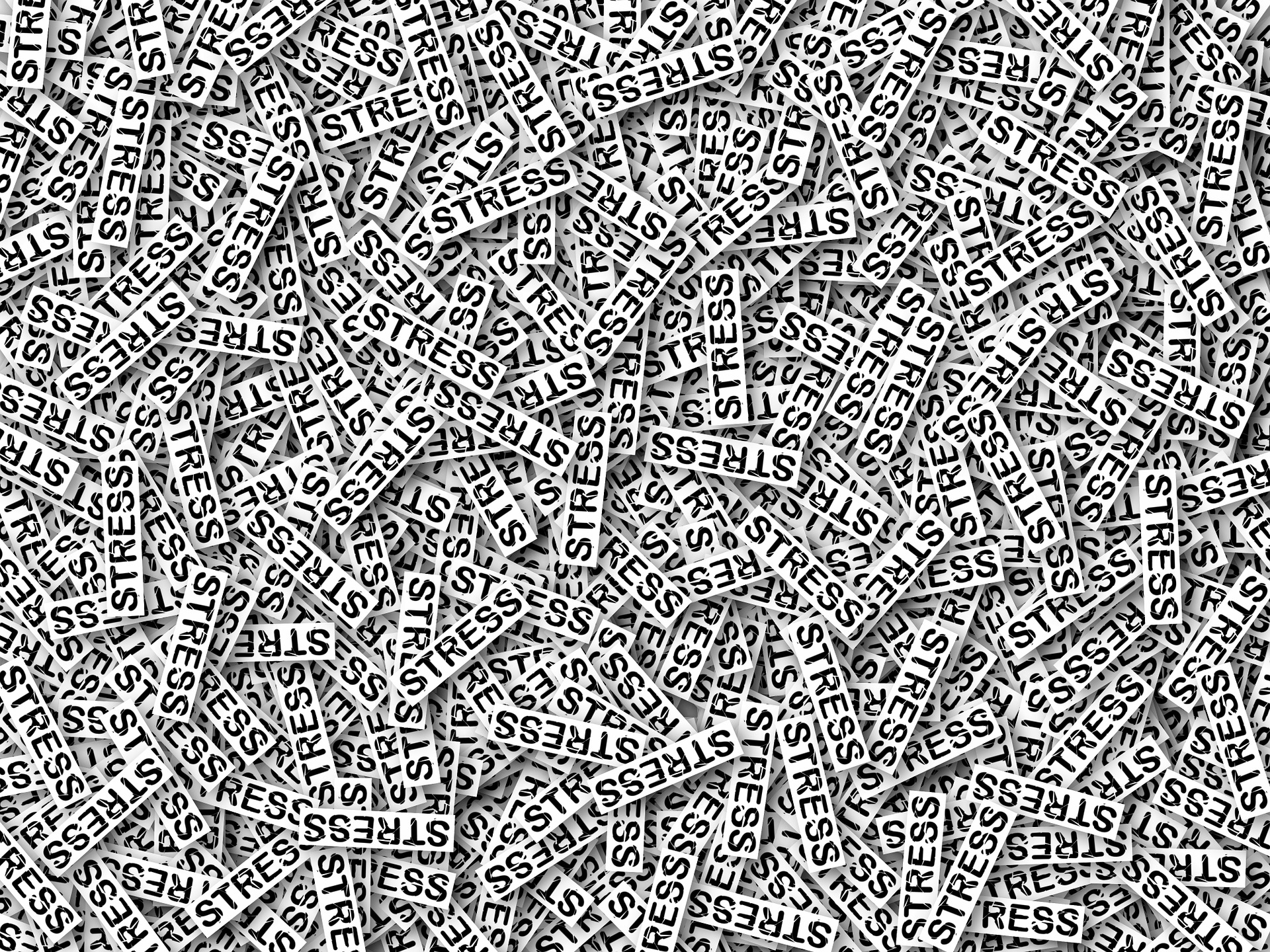
**Start saving for next year on Dec. 26th.** If money is the source of your stress, start packing away a few pence each paycheck. $10 each week will add an additional $520 to your Christmas fund for next year – enough to cover the average budget [per child](https://www.fool.com/retirement/2016/12/01/heres-what-the-average-american-spends-on-holiday.aspx). Financial guru Dave Ramsey further [suggests](https://www.daveramsey.com/blog/5-tips-to-start-christmas-savings-now) stocking up on deals in August and funneling your “under budget” cash into a savings fund for gifts. Having the money set aside will keep stress in check, it’s that simple. But keep in mind, you don’t have to spend hundreds of dollars or over-buy to [compensate](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/26/why-are-parents-spending-so-much-on-their-children-s-christmas-presents_n_7357868.html) for spending time away from your kids because of work or other obligations.

**Learn the word, “no” and don’t be afraid to use it.** An array of seasonal demands can put pressure on an already maxed out schedule, and that will only add to your stress levels. Don’t feel guilty for telling your child’s teacher you can’t bake cupcakes for the class party, refusing to Black Friday shop with your out-of-town and mostly estranged aunt, or opting out of hosting Thanksgiving dinner. You don’t have to be and do all things for all people.

**Talk to someone about your feelings.** Seeking [professional help](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20047544) is nothing to be ashamed of. When your best efforts to waylay stress fall short, your doctor or mental health professional can help guide you back to a place of stability.

**When all else fails, start your own tradition.** Finally, if year after year spending the holidays with your extended family weighs you down too much, it may be time to cut the cord, break with convention, and begin your own new tradition.

Remember, the wonderland of winter is supposed to be a time of joy and good will and all the other things the movies claim. But you still have to live your life and live with yourself afterward. By adopting a few healthy stress squashing habits, you may learn to love the holidays.



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