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Dealing with Holiday Stress

The Ontario Psychological Association Offers Tips to Manage Stress and Promote Health during Holidays

Given the current economic situation, the holidays have the potential to continue to create additional challenges this year. Many families are cutting back, employees are worrying about job security, and seniors are concerned about their retirement. The American Psychological Association's (APA) newest Stress in America survey finds that Americans continue to cite financial and work related concerns as leading sources of stress. While the survey included only American participants, the similar culture and situation of Americans and Canadians may mean that the stressors and the subsequent effects are similar for both. For example, approximately 7 in 10 Americans report that money is a significant source of stress according to APA's 2009 Stress in America survey, with similarly high percentages reporting stress resulting from work (69 %) and the economy (63%). More than half of adults (55%) also cited family responsibilities as a significant source of stress in their lives.

"According to our survey three quarters of adults in this country already report moderate to high levels of stress," says psychologist Katherine Nordal, PhD, APA's executive director for professional practice. "The holiday season can bring with it additional emotional and financial stressors that can negatively impact both physical and mental health."

Psychologists urge parents to pay particular attention to the stress their children may experience during the holidays. The APA's survey found that children are nearly two times more likely to worry about financial concerns than their parents realize. Specifically, 30 percent of youth say they worry about their family having enough money, while only 18 percent of parents report that this is a source of stress for their child.

The *Ontario Psychological Association* offers the following tips:

1. **Take time for yourself.** Taking care of yourself helps you to take better care of others in your life. Go for a long walk or take time out to read or listen to your favorite music. By slowing down you will actually have more energy to accomplish your goals.
2. **Volunteer.** Many charitable organizations face new challenges as a result of the ongoing economic downturn. Find a local charity, such as a soup kitchen or a shelter, where you and your family can volunteer together. Helping others who are less fortunate can put hardships in perspective and can build stronger family relationships.
3. **Set realistic expectations.** No holiday celebration is perfect; view inevitable missteps as opportunities to demonstrate flexibility and resilience. Create a realistic budget and remind your children that the holidays aren't about expensive gifts.
4. **Remember what's important.** Commercialism can overshadow the true sentiment of the holiday season. When your holiday expense list is running longer than your monthly budget, scale back. Remind yourself that family, friends and the relationships in our lives are what matter most.
5. **Seek support.** Talk about stress related to the holidays with your friends and family. Getting things out in the open can help you navigate your feelings and work toward a solution. If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consider talking with a professional such as a psychologist to help you develop coping strategies and better manage your stress. A psychologist has the skills and professional training to help people learn to manage stress and cope more effectively with life problems, using techniques based on best available research and their clinical skills and experience, and taking into account an individual's unique values, goals and circumstances.

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