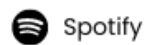




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Season 2: Episode 2: How to Manage Holiday Stress

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

DC: Hi everyone! Welcome back to another episode of the Healthier You Podcast. My name is DeOnna Clark, and I'm one of the health educators here at Vanderbilt Health *Plus*. Joining me today is Dr. Adriana Kipper-Smith. Dr. Kipper-Smith is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, who works here at Work/Life Connections-EAP. She also works with the Faculty and Physicians Wellness Program. Adriana, we are so glad to have you here on the Healthier You Podcast today. Would you mind telling us just a little bit more about your role here at Vanderbilt?

AKS: Hello there, I am glad to be here, too. I work with our staff, faculty, and physicians on both counseling and coaching to help them achieve their goals and improve their psychological wellbeing.

DC: Amazing. Well, we're so glad to have you here, and that is such an important part of what we do here at Vanderbilt Health and Wellness, so thank you for what you do.

So, Adriana and I both are from Vanderbilt Health and Wellness, and we are teaming up today for a cozy conversation to address holiday stress from both physical and mental health perspectives. For many of us, the holidays are an exciting time of year filled with family gatherings, travel, and very delicious food. However, we also understand that this season can bring its own set of stresses. So, let's dive into a holistic discussion on how to manage holiday stress effectively. So, maybe we'll start here. What is stress, and why is it so rampant during the holiday season?

AKS: I would like to start with what the American Psychological Association, the APA, published last year. What they said is that 2 out of 5 people will report higher levels of stress during the holiday season, so

that is about 41% or 42%. And the reasons for that have to do with a number of layers of complexity and corners. Feeling pressure to make the holidays special is one of them, the pressure to spend time with family and friends, and anticipating family conflict, which is big this year, given everything that we're going through in our cultural environment, elections, and things like that. The other point that tends to be very high on people's concern list is financial constraints, the need to make everything, to deliver something. That idea of, "this is what I need to do," the idea of perfection, "what makes a holiday perfect," which there is no such a thing, but we still hold onto those beliefs at times. And being away from family and loved ones, too, during the holidays for a number of reasons can be very stressful. At times, it's due to financial limitation, immigration, when someone is far, far away. And in our big VUMC community, we have people who have loved ones in war zones, which makes the holiday season become even more stressful during those times, too. And grief, things like that.

DC: I'm so appreciative that you shared that perspective, and it's really just interesting to know that so many people experience increased stress around the holidays, and hopefully, it's even validating for someone who may be listening who is like, "oh, I thought I was the only one that was stressed around the holiday," but based on what you're sharing, it seems like that is an experience of a lot of people.

AKS: Yeah, a lot of people. But I like to also note that not all stress is bad. Because we tend to think that when we start feeling excited about something and you notice that physical activation, that all that means, again, quote unquote, because I'm not diagnosing people, that that means anxiety, when at times, you can conceptualize that as excitement, or what is called, too, eustress. Because that is important. That's what makes you get up in the morning and put one foot in front of the other and get excited to make something for yourself or to make something for someone else and makes that you go through challenges in life. All of that is part of that excitement, too. That does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. So, we have to know that stress is a continuum.

DC: Ah! I love that you shared that. Stress is a continuum, and I think it's so important to acknowledge that there are different types of stress, and not all stress is bad. You know, eustress is the type of stress that is a positive thing, where maybe, you know, for a lot of us, we're excited about the holidays, and yeah, that may leave you feeling a little anxious, but it's the type of anxiety where you're anticipating something good.

AKS: Yeah, yeah. One thing that comes to mind now that we are talking about this is many people with young kids in the house, they have to do the Elf on a Shelf and all those things and go through the rituals. Sometimes, that can be stressful, but it's most of the time extremely exciting and fun. That is, too, oh my gosh, I have to get up in the middle of the night to change the position of that, you know, elf and all of that. That there are some parts of this that can be very exciting, and it's the way we look at it that makes a difference, our perspective.

DC: Yeah, I think that's so powerful. Our perspective can really make the difference, it seems. So, in your practice experience, what are some of the most common mental health challenges that people face during the holidays?

AKS: From my experience, generally it's feelings of isolation and the dread of that anticipation, I am going to be alone, on one hand. And then, the second tends to be anticipating conflict with family members and friends. Those tend to be the top main concerns in my practice.

DC: Yeah. Yeah, and you know, when we think about just the value of social connectedness when it comes to our health, we know that feeling isolated can really be impactful for many people, and yeah, when you're having increased family time around the holidays, maybe that's increased chance of having those difficult conversations and conflicts. So, yeah, that makes sense that you see that a little bit more in your practice.

AKS: Mm-hmm, exactly.

DC: Yeah.

AKS: There are a number of things that we can do to address that, though. I think we're going to be covering them.

DC: Yeah, absolutely. We're excited to get there. But before we get there, we know, again, just as we've been talking about, the holidays can bring about a lot of pressure, as you've already acknowledged, whether it be with family, gift-giving, or just trying to meet expectations. So, how can individuals shift their perspective from striving for a "perfect holiday," to embracing a more realistic and fulfilling experience.

AKS: So, focusing on what is most important to you, and this requires some level of quiet introspection. It's very important that you have that time. Take time for and yourself and focusing on your ability to create moments of true connection, and that can be helpful when you're struggling with that pressure for perfection, too. Remember what is important to you and focus on what you and your family have in common. You know, not necessarily on "let's have difficult conversations here." That's not the time. Always focusing on that shared ground, what you have in common, tends to be helpful, and having realistic expectations, too. So, no Christmas, Hanukah, Kwanzaa, and other holiday celebrations are perfect. So, talking with others, seeking support. The holiday season can create the opportunity for togetherness, like you mentioned DeOnna, the connectedness, and that's so important and so beneficial to our mental health, and we all tend to downplay the role of that.

DC: What really stood out to me right there is just finding that point of connection. You know, it may be a time to be tempted to focus on things that are going wrong or may be the point of conflict, but from what you're sharing, it seems like finding that point of connectedness or that time to be together is a good way to shift your perspective.

AKS: Yeah, yes, for sure.

DC: Let's dive just a little bit deeper into just how individuals can deal with feelings of loneliness, grief, and sadness that may be heightened during the holidays. And I mention that specifically because we know just from a mental health perspective that some of those things can, you know, be really impactful for some during this time. So, can you speak to that just a little bit.

AKS: Of course, of course. I will go back to the social connection component, which is critical and underappreciated, and it's a contributor to our mental health and wellbeing, and this is named by Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general. I am not implying that this is easy in any way, but sometimes, getting over our fear of rejection can open our world to a whole lot of generosity and kindness. If you're anticipating being alone, communicate that with trusted others around you. It can be your faith community, coworkers, neighbors. Chances are, someone will find a way to open a space for you in their lives. If that's not a possibility, there are many other ways to show up for others, as well, in the form of volunteering. There are several organizations that are looking for volunteers during the holidays, and being present to others turns out to be a nice warm hug to ourselves. This is a big deal when it comes to wellbeing. And of course, if you need help, if you're struggling, reach out, seek support. We are here. There are a number of resources. If you don't find anyone around you who you can talk to, call us. Reach out to EAP. Do something. Don't just stay there.

DC: Thank you for sharing that, and I love how you acknowledge just the gift of giving. You know, maybe you don't have the opportunity to connect in certain ways, but, you know, it's a great time to think about how to give to others, and you're right, often when we are giving to others, or even volunteering, that is a wonderful way to fuel ourselves. So, I am so glad that you acknowledged that.

AKS: That is such a tremendous gift to ourselves when we're doing something for others. It has an impact on your mental health. If you measure how you're feeling before and after, you notice that in your body how that action is helpful.

DC: Well, you've already shared some wonderful strategies with us about managing mental health during the holidays, but what are some things that individuals can effectively implement into their daily routines, maybe even starting today?

AKS: The first thing that I consider to be key is managing one's expectations. We all need to work on that, but managing those expectations about what the holidays should look like. There is an author I like. Her name is Priya Parker, and she has that book *The Art of Gathering*, and she talks about the concept of very much, like, that is called the "generous exclusion". What she means by that is that the more is not always the merrier. Sometimes, you have to be very selective about those you want to be around during that time, and that is the generosity in it toward yourself and those who are there, because it's about what makes sense to you, what aligns better and best with your values. It's not necessarily about that "should." And that's a good strategy. The other thing is that it's mostly, it's things that you can implement. Provide structure during that time. Take your breaks, build in time to rest, recharge, and do nothing. That's so important. And limit time together if there are concerns, and consider the needs of children, seniors, and all of that. Delegate and try to align your expectations with the limitations of your reality. You just need to be at times. And being does not mean merry, bright. Sometimes being is just being there and acknowledging how you're feeling. And sadness is part of it, too. Grief is part of it, too. Feeling overwhelmed may be part of it, too. And honor what is important to you and nurture gratitude. I think that is always one strategy that is very effective when we need to do a perspective shift. When you're feeling like, "oh, my mood is going down," focus on gratitude. That is a wonderful reset. What

about that experience, those last five minutes, the last 10 minutes, that day that made you grateful for, that inspired you. It can be little things, little things. So, that's what I would suggest.

DC: Those are just wonderful, wonderful suggestions that you shared with us and just so many highlights from those strategies, but I think, too, you know, even with the time of year that it is right now, I love how you focused on just the gratitude part and it being the end of the year, you know, whether it's holiday season and that's a positive time, or maybe you have a different experience. Nonetheless, this is the last month of the year, and it's just a great opportunity to reflect and hopefully draw out those things that we're grateful for. And I do know that research tells us that just having that increased gratitude can be so powerful for many, so, thanks for sharing that.

AKS: Yeah, exactly. You are so welcome.

AKS: So, DeOnna, I'm going to ask you a few questions, too, because you have a lot to contribute. You are a health educator here at Health *Plus*, and from what I understand, you're also an occupational therapist, so there is a lot of wisdom there, too. So, in your experience, what are some common physical symptoms of holiday stress?

DC: It's interesting because stress can manifest in a variety of ways, and we often think of stress in the context of mental health, which, honestly, would be appropriate. However, our bodies are wired to give us signals when we are under stress, and so it is so important to listen to our bodies, especially during this time of the year as it relates to stress, because more than likely, it's giving you a little pulse check on how you're doing. But, to answer your question, physical symptoms around this time of year regarding stress could look like headaches. You know, maybe you suffer from headaches around this time of year, and you're not quite sure why. Stress could be a reason. Even muscle fatigue. You know, many people hold their stress in their muscles, and that may result in just stiffness and tightness and just having that tension. Fatigue is a big one. Perhaps, you feel just more tired around this time of the year, and you know, there is a lot going on. Maybe you're doing extra shopping and all the things, but fatigue and just decreased energy is another physical symptom. And then, even digestive issues. We carry a lot of our stress and angst for many of us in our gut, so maybe that tummy ache around this time of the year, you may have thought it was from your favorite dish, but maybe, perhaps, it's from holiday stress. So, for some, it could also be sleep. Maybe you're suffering with insomnia or just restless sleep. And again, I love how you acknowledged earlier that stress, can be the stress that we think about, but it can also be eustress. So maybe it's that "oh my goodness, I'm going to open presents in the morning!" or "I'm going to have this wonderful dinner tomorrow," and you're just a little restless, so, yeah. Losing sleep probably isn't the funnest thing, but we also can think about stress on both sides of that. But, all in all, symptoms are typically due to increased levels of stress hormones called cortisol, and that can really impact us both physically and mentally.

AKS: That is great, thank you. So, how can people maintain a healthy diet during the holidays, despite the abundance of fast foods, because that is what was on my mind as you were talking about it, you know, having GI issues, and so, what are your thoughts.

DC: Yeah, oh man, this is such a meaningful topic because this is the time of the year where we enjoy our favorite foods, and I first want to acknowledge that that is a good thing, being able to have that balance, you know, enjoy your favorite dish. When we look at health holistically, I want to acknowledge that that's a good thing. With that said, one way to maintain a healthy diet is focusing on portion control, or even enjoying your favorite foods in moderation. So, maybe this year it's not about like, oh, I can't eat that favorite food, you know, I have these diet goals. But maybe it's like, hmm, maybe I can eat a little less of that, or maybe I can do it in moderation. So, that's another way to think about trying to maintain a healthy diet. And then also just aiming to incorporate more fruits and veggies and whole grains into your meals to balance out the richer dishes. So, maybe for me, my favorite food ever is macaroni and cheese. You know, maybe you have that, or maybe I'll have that, and frankly, I will have that, but maybe it'll be in a smaller portion, but I'll make sure that I have, you know, my favorite veggies with that and some fruits and whole grains, as well. So, just keeping that balance as you eat some of those more favorite dishes, and then really staying hydrated. You know, I think this is a time of the year, understandably, for sugary drinks and just other beverages that may be preferable, but staying hydrated with plenty of water is an excellent way to help you maintain a healthy diet during this time of the year.

So, some practical tips for staying active include just regular or even shorter workouts. Maybe you enjoy walks during this time of the year, and you can incorporate your family after the holiday meal. I know sometimes at this time of the year having a 5k around Thanksgiving. I think that's in the past now, but maybe there's a 5K around Christmas for those who are able to engage in that type of thing. So, just finding ways to move our bodies that maybe incorporate our family or friends, and just, yeah, enjoy maybe a shorter walk. Maybe it's not as intensive a workout, but get some movement in. It can be stretching, yoga, things that feel good. Things that are a little bit more calming. All of those things can be excellent ways to keep moving during this time of the year.

AKS: Okay. You made me smile on the inside now just listening to you, because I signed up for a 5K.

DC: Oh, awesome!

AKS: It's called the Turkey Trot.

DC: Yes, the Turkey Trot! That's right. A popular one.

AKS: So, DeOnna, with mindfulness being so popular and so widespread, because it is effective, what relaxation techniques would you suggest for managing stress during the holiday season.

DC: You know, mindfulness and relaxation techniques are highly effective in managing holiday stress, and mindfulness can look like many things, such as deep breathing exercises, even doing muscle relaxation. Some may enjoy guided imagery that can help calm the mind and the body, but ultimately, even with meditation, sometimes even to what you were sharing earlier, it can just mean sitting with yourself, just having that quiet moment. Maybe you have a corner in your house that is your favorite, or maybe you have a favorite park, or maybe it does include someone that you love and are safe with, and just having that quiet moment. I think that was very powerful that you shared that earlier, and I think it's relevant here as it relates to mindfulness. So, the holidays can be such a busy time of the year. There's a lot going on. There's lights. There's excitement. But, just being intentional about following or having that time of

quiet can be an excellent way to destress during this time. And I would be remiss not to acknowledge that here at Health *Plus*, we do have weekly mindful stretch breaks every Wednesday at 11 a.m. on Teams. So, if you're looking for a way to get started with mindfulness, that's a great place to start. Join us. We would love to have you.

AKS: That is wonderful. So, DeOnna, what advice do you have for maintaining a positive outlook and enjoying the holiday season, despite these traps.

DC: My big takeaway just from our conversation today is really just looking at shifting perspective. And I think, as it relates to the physical side of holiday stress, I would think about shifting our perspective to what is realistic during this time of the year, and that even prompts me to think about smart goals. So, I talk about smart goals a lot in my coaching practice here at Health Plus. And setting a smart goal just looks like looking at something that is specific, measurable, but I love the heart of the smart goal, because it talks about what is attainable and realistic. And then, of course, it just being time-bound. So, maybe this is a great opportunity at this time of the year to say, okay, I have this amount of days left in this year or this amount of days left until the holiday, what's attainable, what's realistic in terms of, you know, moving your body this month. What's attainable and what's realistic for you to enjoy some of those favorite dishes, but also, keep to your health goals. And so, think about setting a smart goal at this time of year, and that can be one way to manage your stress, still honor your health goals if you have them, and really enjoy this time of year.


AKS: That's wonderful.

DC: What are your thoughts, Adriana? I would love to hear just about any advice you have for our listeners on how we can manage holiday stress from a mental health perspective.

AKS: Well, in addition to the suggestions I mentioned earlier, one thing that I will reflect on and highlight as much as I can is take a break for yourself and give yourself that quiet introspection time, too. That is so important. And when you are in it, one suggestion I have will be, think about what will be a gift to yourself. Something that you can gift yourself. That is important. Not necessarily, "oh, I need to go to the mall," not that type of gift, but perhaps something that you can give yourself that is more intangible than, you know, just something monetary, but something that you can give yourself permission to have or something that you can give yourself permission to say "I need that" from someone else. All of those things are important. Think about what is needed at that time. That's what I would suggest.

DC: Such a wonderful suggestion. Just giving the gift of whatever you need to yourself. I think that's a wonderful way to kind of conclude the suggestions, so thank you for sharing.

AKS: You're welcome.

DC: Thank you Adriana for sharing your valuable insights on managing holiday stress. Your expertise is a wonderful reminder of the importance of both physical and mental wellness during this festive season. Remember, practicing self-care and showing compassion to yourself and others can make a significant difference in navigating holiday stress. We look forward to seeing you all next year. 

Thanks for tuning in to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness. Stay tuned for future episodes.