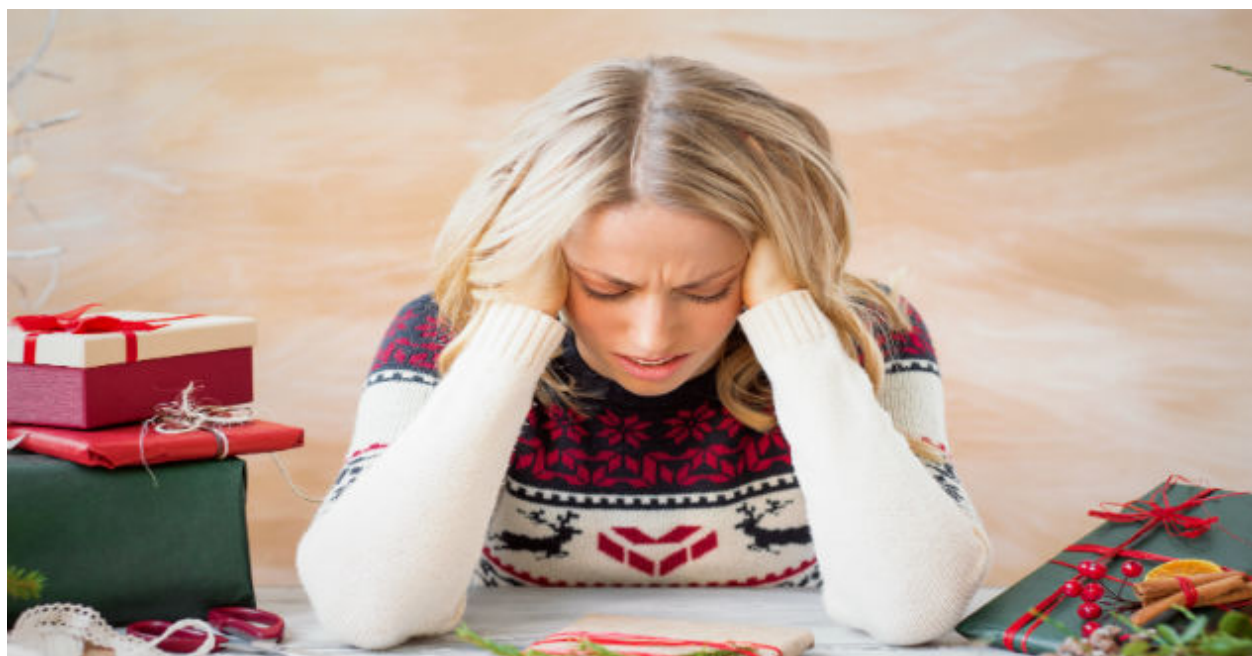


# 6 Tips for Handling Holiday Stress

Divine Mercy University

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We always look to the holidays as a time of celebration; a magical time of good cheer, warm traditions, and being with family and friends. We think of it as a time of rest and relaxation, filled with joy and gratitude for all that we have.

Despite the surface magic and positivity, the holidays are often accompanied by even busier schedules and events that can seem daunting. For many people, the mere idea of attending large family gatherings, numerous holiday parties, and all the traveling can produce anxiety, stress, and depression. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), three out of four people surveyed reported feeling anxious and/or depressed during the holiday season.

Holiday parties in particular are a common stressor, especially for those with a social anxiety disorder. For some, they'll try anything to avoid activities that involve larger groups. For others, the problem lies in attempting to have the "best" Christmas ever, where the thought of something being out of place or decorations falling short can cause significant feelings of distress, as well as fears of disappointing others or feeling that everything they do is being scrutinized and judged.

"There's just so much that goes into the holidays," said Dr. Alexis Melville, co-director of the IPS Center for Psychological Services, an outpatient mental health facility located on the campus of Divine Mercy University. "We're rushing all over the place just trying to tie up loose ends and get everything prepared for the celebrations, but we also tend to self-evaluate how we did throughout the year. There are perceived societal pressures throughout the holiday season that can amplify expectations for ourselves or others, and those expectations can induce a greater anxiety during these times."

You don't have to succumb to the holiday stress. Here are some ways to help manage the stress this holiday season:

## 1. ***Plan***

The holidays may feel like one gigantic party, where everyone is invited and you're the host. Like with all parties, planning for it is a key practice toward success. Plan your menus, make your shopping list early, and set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. This will help prevent last-minute scrambling for forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup so that you're not doing EVERYTHING.

## 2. ***Be realistic***

We love our traditions, but the holidays don't have to be perfect. In fact, they're never the same. Life changes. Families grow and traditions will change. You can try to hold onto some old traditions, but try starting new ones too.

### 3. ***Set aside differences***

It's no secret that some family gatherings can be tense, but chances are that everyone is feeling the same holiday stress. Try to accept family members and friends as they are and set aside old grievances. Try to be understanding if others get upset or distressed.

### 4. ***Set healthy boundaries***

It is easy to feel pulled in many different directions over the holidays, but don't be afraid to make the choices that feel right for you; overindulgence, especially with alcohol, only adds to the stress.

Try to get plenty of exercise and sleep during the holidays. Also try eating a healthy snack before the parties so that you don't go overboard on cheese, drinks, and candy canes.

### 5. ***Take a breather***

Make some time for yourself. Spending 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.

### 6. ***Just say no***

It's okay to turn down invitations. We may want to be involved or feel pressured to be involved. Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.

Following these tips and strategies can help you reduce anxiety and take control of the holidays. Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself still feeling persistently anxious, stressed, or sad. Perhaps there was a change in your life that altered how you

approach holidays — a good friend may have moved far away and can't celebrate with you, or a loved one passed away. If you lost someone dear to you, it's normal to feel their absence; it's normal to feel grief in their absence.

If these feelings last for a while and manifest physically and if you're feeling irritable, hopeless, unable to sleep or unable to perform routine chores, then you should seek out a mental health professional.

The IPS Center at Divine Mercy University offers psychological services on a sliding scale basis. Services are offered by supervised doctoral students and are available to both adults and children. For more information, call (703) 418-2111 or email [ipscenter@divinemercy.edu](mailto:ipscenter@divinemercy.edu).