

## Certified Health Coach Donna Parker Shares Useful Tips to Handle Stress and Anxiety During the Holidays

The holidays are here again and although we love them, it can be a very stressful time. While this festive season can bring us wonderful moments with friends and family, they can also drown us in an overabundance of rich food, sweets, and a hectic social schedule that can add unwanted stress to our busy lives.

Stress affects how fat and sugar are processed in the body. It also affects weight gain, heart disease, sleep, hormones, and DNA. It can even shorten your life. Stress can sometimes lead to anxiety, which can trigger late night or mindless eating that adds pounds and inches to your body. So what do you do about it?

**Maintain Your Routine:** One of the best ways to stay fit and healthy during the holidays is to keep to your routine as much as possible. Be sure to get to bed by 10 p.m. on the nights you are not out celebrating. It's much easier to pass up extra food if you are well-rested. Get to the gym or do your workouts regularly. Exercise increases your energy and reduces your cravings. Sometimes, people neglect their regular routine from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day with the promise to start anew with a New Year's resolution. Heading into the holiday season with that attitude is a recipe for disaster. Feeling fit going into the season while sustaining your exercise regimen decreases your stress levels and enables you to stay on track and preserve your weight and health goals.

**Waiting to Exhale:** If you're breathing in a stressful way, stop what you're doing and take five deep belly breaths. Inhale while feeling your belly rise and fill with oxygen. Release the breath fully and completely. Do this five times and you will start to engage the parasympathetic (relaxing) nervous system. You'll begin to feel calmer.

**Stop the mindless eating:** Although stressed is desserts spelled backwards, it doesn't mean you have to dive into the dessert bar. Gratuitous eating can trigger unsavory eating habits. Identifying and acknowledging your triggers will help you to start shifting your behavior. Consuming sugar releases serotonin, the *feel good* hormone. So when you reach for the tasty treats at holiday social gatherings, you may be striving to feel happier in the moment. Being conscious of the connection between sugar and carbohydrates with serotonin and feeling happier can help you feel better naturally by going for a walk or having a laugh with a friend.

**Eat regular, balanced meals:** Start your day with breakfast within one hour of rising and include protein in that and every meal throughout the day. This will get your blood sugar in a normal range and boost your energy. If you need a snack, pair it with protein like an apple with nuts, nut butter, or cheese. Don't skip meals. It may entice you to overeat later. Eat at least three, well-balanced meals daily that include protein and lots of veggies. Keep refined carbohydrates to a minimum as they can trigger sugar cravings, which can be a very slippery slope.

**Limit your alcohol:** Save the alcohol until after you've eaten something with protein like nuts, turkey or cheese. All that sugar on an empty stomach will just spike your blood sugar levels. When your levels plummet, you'll end up ravenous. Alcohol also quells your inhibitions. That often leads to senselessly snacking resulting to consuming larger quantities of snacks than planned. Remember to drink water between alcoholic drinks as alcohol is dehydrating.

**Get enough sleep:** Many people are running around sleep deprived and consuming massive amounts of caffeine to make it through the day (keep the coffee consumption to before 11 a.m. to help with sleep). When you're sleep deprived, you'll have less patience when minor issues arise making you short-tempered and not quite the *holly jolly soul* that people want to celebrate with. Getting to bed between 9-10 p.m. is ideal for your internal body clock. Have a wind down routine. Lower the lights and turn-off the electronics. If you are a night owl, go to bed 15-minutes earlier per week. Make it a slow transition and you will reap the benefits of a restful night's sleep.

Whether you are celebrating at home, with friends, or at a cocktail party, remember to enjoy the company you are with and the conversation flowing around you. Take a moment to be thankful and appreciative of the important people and the abundance in your life. This self-reflection will make the stress of the holidays fade.

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