NO PREP

Holiday Stress

How the Season Affects Your Body and Mind

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Holiday Stress: How the Season Affects Your Body and Mind

Why the "Most Wonderful Time of the Year" Can Feel Overwhelming

On commercials and social media, the holiday season looks perfect: smiling families, cozy lights, and endless trays of cookies. In real life, December can feel very different, especially for teens and young adults. You might be juggling final exams, part-time jobs, family obligations, and social pressure to be "festive" even when you're exhausted. Money worries, complicated family relationships, or grief over someone who isn't there can make all the "joy" feel fake. Psychologists use the term stress to describe how your body and mind respond to demands or threats. Not all stress is bad—acute stress can help you focus for a test or a game—but when stress builds up without enough recovery, it can turn into chronic stress. The holiday season often

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What Stress Does Inside Your Body

When you feel stressed—whether from an argument at dinner or a pile of late assignments—your body activates the fight-or-flight response. Your brain's amygdala sounds an alarm, and the hypothalamus sends signals to release stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Your heart rate increases, your breathing

speeds up, and blood is directed toward large muscles so you can react quickly. In a short-term emergency, this response can be lifesaving. During the holiday season, though, the stress response may be triggered over and over by non-emergency situations: running late for a shift, worrying about gifts, dealing with family conflict, or seeing everyone else's "perfect" life online. When cortisol stays high for too long, it can interfere with sleep, immune function, and mood. You might notice more headaches or stomachaches, feel on edge, or have trouble concentrating. Some people cope by overeating, oversleeping, or withdrawing; others may turn to substances like alcohol or vaping, which can make stress worse in the long run. Here is a quick summary of how holiday stress can show up: This table isn't meant to diagnose you, but to give you language for what you might already feel. When you can name a stressor and recognize your body's reaction, you are better able to choose a healthier response instead of just reacting on autopilot.

Holiday Habits: Sleep, Food, and Social Media

One reason holiday stress builds up is that healthy routines quietly fall apart. Sleep is often the first casualty. Late-night studying, parties, travel, or gaming can push your bedtime later and later. Your body's circadian rhythm, which relies on regular light–dark cycles, becomes confused. When you sleep less, your brain has a harder time regulating emotions, making small problems feel huge. Food patterns can also shift. Holiday meals are not "bad," but constant snacking, skipping regular meals, or treating every day like a feast can leave you sluggish. High sugar and caffeine intake may give quick bursts of energy followed by crashes, increasing irritability and anxiety. On the opposite side, some people eat less when stressed, which can lead to low energy and difficulty focusing. The goal isn't a "perfect" diet; it's a pattern that keeps your blood sugar and energy relatively stable. Then there's social media. During the holidays, people tend to post the best version of their lives: highlight reels of gifts, vacations, and happy families. If you're already stressed, it's easy to compare your real life to someone else's edited photos and feel like you're failing. Psychologists call this social comparison, and research suggests it can increase symptoms of depression and anxiety, especially when you believe everyone else is doing better than you. Taking short breaks from scrolling, unfollowing accounts that make you feel worse, and remembering that posts are curated, not complete reality, can protect your mental health.

Coping Skills and Boundaries for a Healthier Holiday

The goal is not to eliminate all stress—that's impossible—but to build coping skills and boundaries that keep stress at manageable levels. Coping skills are tools you use to move your body and brain out of constant fight-or-flight and back toward balance. Simple practices like deep breathing, short walks, stretching, journaling, or listening to calming music can signal your nervous system to slow down. Even five minutes between activities can make a difference. Boundaries are the limits you set on your time, energy, and money. Saying, "I can't pick up an extra shift this week," or "I can bring one dish, not three," may feel uncomfortable at first, especially if you're used to saying "yes" to everything. However, boundaries are not selfish; they are a form of self-respect and a basic health skill. Talking with a trusted adult or friend about your limits can help you practice what to say. If stress feels unmanageable—if you experience constant hopelessness, panic attacks, or thoughts of hurting yourself—it's important to reach out for professional help. School counselors, nurses, and mental health professionals are trained to support students facing more than everyday stress. Reaching out is a sign of strength, not failure. As you move through the holiday season, it can help to ask yourself three questions each week: "What can I let go of?", "What do I need more of?" and "Who can support me?" The answers will look different for everyone, but the goal is the same: a holiday season that doesn't just look good on the outside, but actually supports your physical and mental health.

Key Information

Holiday Stressor	Body/Mind Reaction	Healthier Response
Crowded schedule, exams, extra shifts	Racing heart, muscle tension, irritability	Time blocking, saying "no," short breaks
Family conflict or awkward gatherings	Worry, anger, trouble sleeping	Grounding techniques, support from a trusted adult
Social media comparison	Low mood, self-criticism, body image concerns	Limiting screen time, following positive accounts

Holiday Stressor	Body/Mind Reaction	Healthier Response
Money and gift pressure	Anxiety, guilt, feeling "behind"	Setting a budget, low-cost or handmade gifts
Grief or loneliness	Sadness, withdrawal, feeling out of place	Reaching out, new rituals, counseling if needed

Case Study Excerpt – "I Thought the Holidays Were a Break"

By the first week of December, Kayla's calendar was full. She had three finals, two shift changes at her part-time job, and a group chat full of relatives planning a big holiday dinner at her house. Every time her phone buzzed with another message—"Can you make dessert?" "Don't forget to pick up Grandma from the airport!"—her shoulders tightened. At night, she lay in bed scrolling through photos of friends in matching pajamas, surrounded by perfectly wrapped gifts. Her own bedroom floor was a mess of textbooks, laundry, and half-finished notes. When Kayla started waking up with headaches and a tight feeling in her chest, she told herself she just needed to "push through." She skipped lunch to study, stayed up late to finish assignments, and said "yes" to extra hours at work because she didn't want to disappoint her manager. By the time the holiday dinner arrived, she felt numb. As her relatives laughed in the living room, she hid in the kitchen, washing dishes with her earbuds in. Only when her younger cousin asked, "Why do you look so tired? Aren't you on break?" did she realize that her body had been sending distress signals for weeks—and she hadn't listened.

1. Which specific signs suggest that Kayla is experiencing chronic stress rather than just a one-day problem?

2. What are two points in the story where Kayla could have made a different choice to protect her health?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, chronic stress during the holidays is most likely to occur when:

    a) The body's stress response is activated repeatedly without enough recovery

    b) A single event is mildly annoying for a few minutes

    c) Someone eats a large holiday meal once in December

    d) A person never experiences any deadlines or responsibilities in daily life

2. Which example best illustrates the fight-or-flight response in a modern holiday situation?

    a) Taking a quiet walk after dinner with family in a peaceful outdoor park setting

    b) Feeling calm while reading a book by the fireplace

    c) Heart racing and muscles tensing when you're late to work and stuck in traffic

    d) Daydreaming about a future vacation during class

3. The reading suggests that one effective way to reduce social media–related holiday stress is to:

    a) Assume every picture you see shows the full reality of a person's life

    b) Post constantly on social media so you never feel left out of the feed

    c) Compare your holiday posts to everyone else's to stay competitive

    d) Unfollow accounts that make you feel worse and limit your scrolling time

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Acute stress	A) Tools like deep breathing or journaling that reduce tension
2. ___ Cortisol	B) A limit you set on your time, energy, or money
3. ___ Coping skills	C) Judging your own life against other people's highlight reels online
4. ___ Social comparison	D) Stress hormone released during the fight-or-flight response
5. ___ Boundary	E) Short-term response that can help you focus in emergencies

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. When the brain senses a threat, it activates the _____-or-_____ response, preparing the body to react.

2. Seeing only other people's highlight reels online and assuming your life is worse is an example of social _____.

3. Saying "I can only come for one hour" instead of agreeing to an entire event is an example of setting a healthy _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Describe two physical or emotional signs that someone might be experiencing holiday-related stress, based on the reading or case study.

_____

_____

_____

2. Using Kayla's story, identify one unhealthy coping strategy she used and suggest a healthier alternative she could have tried.

3. What is one specific change you (or a typical student) could make to your sleep, food, or social media habits to reduce stress during the holidays? Explain why it might help.