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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #12:

HOLIDAY STRESS AND ANXIETY PREVENTION

Are you approaching winter celebrations with apprehension? We have practical tips on how you can find fun in your function!

Regardless of beliefs or religion, the approaching winter season brings with it the close to another calendar year and in many instances a celebratory atmosphere throughout various cultures. We're about to head into a high season of get-togethers with friends, family, neighbours and co-workers. We'll gather to share meals and take part in a host of other colder-weather traditions. Many would suggest these moments are supposed to make us feel good, filling us with joy and a renewed sense of togetherness. So, why is it that so many of us are finding that we no longer share this sentiment?

For some, it may not be the most wonderful time of the year

Every year the cavalcade of consumer goods associated with our various winter celebrations get stocked earlier and earlier on store shelves. The commercial blitz combined with the visual stimuli serves as a constant reminder of the coming holidays. Unfortunately for some, there are negative repercussions to the inescapability of the season. For those who have sensitive memories or highly emotional or traumatic events from past years tied to the holiday season, various triggers may induce strong reactions including anxiety and/or depression, and in some instances even phobias that can affect people's dispositions and behaviours significantly and may lead or contribute to adverse health outcomes.

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So, what can we do about this?

It's time for us to listen to our instincts and acknowledge what our minds and bodies are telling us. We can minimize some of the increased anxiety and reduce some of the stress that we feel building about the impending festivities by recognizing the symptoms we are experiencing, acknowledging our reactions to them, and developing plans to put safeguards and solutions in place that allow us to be better prepared for these events.

Recognizing the symptoms of anxiety

Generally, anxiety is a reasonable and temporary reaction to stressful situations or environments. What makes things more complicated is when someone has an anxiety disorder. In this case, the anticipation of what could happen at a holiday-related event may bring on more debilitating symptoms like shallow breathing, heart palpitations, and irritability as the body responds with intense reactions that might seem disproportionately strong. These kinds of extreme anxiety responses have often been brought on by interpersonal conflict. Conditioned over time, these responses have trained the brain to overestimate the level of risk and/or danger that exists within a given situation. Someone with an anxiety disorder might experience the sudden onset of headaches, dizziness or even high blood pressure. While the scenario of relatives arguing about something might be somewhat uncomfortable for everyone, for a person with an anxiety disorder, this can have a very physical reaction that is instinctive and can be devastating. It's "fight or flight" in action. They may immediately feel like they need to withdraw and depending on the degree of uneasiness and tension that has been introduced, they may not be able to rejoin the gathering and may feel compelled to leave the immediate environment.

Clues your body uses to show that you are feeling stressed

While some people insist they are motivated when they are feeling stressed, a stress reaction can actually set off instinctive physical, behavioural and psychological changes in our bodies that over time, can have a significant effect on our long-term health. Though you might not think they are related, stress reactions can cause you to lose sleep, create upper respiratory or digestive problems, be related to the development of hypertension, and over the longer term may be associated with coronary heart disease. Have you noticed nervous habits like nail biting increase when you're stressed? If you're a smoker, have you observed that you might be consuming more cigarettes when stress runs high? Even seemingly innocent things like a lack of patience, reduced activity levels, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, and uncharacteristic interpersonal conflicts are warning signs that your body is reacting to an increased amount of stress. The challenge in recognizing our reactions is that we think these are just normal responses. It's easy to rationalize that we've only had a bad day or are in a bad mood.

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Seven techniques you can use to help diminish your anxiety or alleviate stress

Being able to recognize anxiety and stress reactions is a great first step. The ultimate goal is to be able to respond with techniques that can be used to stop the escalation and re-focus ourselves.

1. Express yourself.

Although it goes against what your body may be telling you, it's essential to stay connected with people who are supportive, caring and sympathetic. Meeting with trusted family members or friends who will listen to how you are feeling and help you express yourself is one way to reduce anxiousness and stress.

2. Look on the bright side

Being able to reframe your perspective allows someone to look at difficult situations with a goal in mind to overcome any negative thinking. Shifting problems into opportunities can be a beneficial way to feel more in control.

3. Take a moment just to breathe

Your brain can switch from a stressed state to a relaxed and calm demeanor when you concentrate on the simple act of inhaling and exhaling. Over time, you can develop skilled relaxation that extends to release muscle tension and relieve feelings of anxiousness. Close your eyes, clear your mind and notice nothing but the rhythm of your breath. You could even use a positive message to stay focused: Life is beautiful. This is the very essence of meditation, and with practice, you can see significant improvements in concentration and your overall feelings of well-being.

4. Get enough sleep

Getting a restful night's sleep helps you cope better with the stresses you experienced during the day and enables you to prepare for tomorrow. Studies have repeatedly shown that the optimal amount of sleep ranges between seven and eight hours each night. After you feel more rested, you may even feel energized enough to wake up early to plan your day.

5. Exercise. Even 20 minutes a day can help

When you exercise, your body produces endorphins that combat stress and fatigue. Walk, swim, or dance. Move your arms and legs, stretch, get your blood circulating. Listen to music while you work out to help put you in a positive mood. Findings suggest that between 20 and 40 minutes of aerobic activity can result in a reduction of stress levels for several hours.

6. Plan ahead and prioritize

One of the best things you can do to stay calm and focused in stressful situations is to anticipate what could happen and visualize what you would do and what the priorities would be. Make a list of things you need to remember or complete, identify goals and remember, be kind to yourself by recognizing your accomplishments and progress.

7. Watch what you eat, drink and indulge in

Be aware of the effects that your dietary choices can have on anxiety and stress. Caffeine has been shown to increase cortisol levels, which in turn can lead to anxiousness. Nicotine is a powerful stimulant that produces epinephrine (adrenaline) when inhaled. Adrenaline can spike glucose levels, which in turn increases blood pressure, heart rate and respiration, creating conditions for an anxiety attack. Alcohol is both a stimulant and a depressant that causes mood and emotional changes that can induce an anxious response, trigger a depressive state and in some instances may result in fatigue. Often holiday gatherings mean an abundance of sweets and treats - with high levels of sugar and fat. Pay attention to your body's need for healthy food during this busy time of year.

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What else can you do to feel well throughout the season of winter celebrations?

Have the courage to be honest with your friends and family about how they can be involved and help you with goals to reduce stress and anxiety. Clarify expectations that they may have of you and reframe them. It may mean that you need to take a step back from traditions that you don't enjoy. That's okay. Releasing expectations from past years that have created anxious or stressful responses can be very liberating. This also allows you to focus on the current year: It's okay if priorities look different than those of past holidays or years.

Take time to reflect on the deeper meaning of these gatherings and events for you personally, for your family and your social circle. Think about what makes this year unique and memorable.

Finally, don't try and control the uncontrollable, especially other people's behaviour. Focus on the things you can control: like the way you choose to react to a perceived problem. If you need to, step back from stressful situations so you can move away from the emotional reaction that could create an anxious response.

Remind yourself of what's important. Will it matter in a month, or in a year's time? Some people use the five by five rule to assess a situation: if it's not going to matter in five years, don't' spend more than five minutes being upset by it.

In the end, it's about the series of small steps you can take to keep your brain calm at a particularly stressful time of year. Worrying is a habit you can learn to manage!

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