



CALLTIME
MENTAL HEALTH

MANAGING HOLIDAY STRESS

A COMPLETE GUIDE

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Introduction

Working in the film industry can be stressful all year round, and many people look forward to having a break over the holiday season to spend time with family and friends. But the holidays can also be a time of stress and anxiety, often caused by a combination of financial pressure, dealing with family dynamics or loneliness, and struggling with mental health.

During a season when we feel like we're supposed to be happy, it can be especially difficult when you feel anxious, sad, or alone. Many people experience a dip in their energy during winter and with everything that has to be done, it can feel a little overwhelming. Employers might be pushing to get certain projects finished in time before the new year, or there might be little work available during the festive season.

When it all comes together, it can increase stress levels and exacerbate mental health issues. If left unmanaged, stress and worry can take a toll on your mental and physical health so we've created this guide to help you get through the holidays, and hopefully enjoy them!

We'll explore some reasons why this season can feel so stressful and why some people get the 'winter blues'. You'll find tips and advice for developing plans and creating healthy habits so that you can feel calm and relaxed during the holiday season. Let's get started!



Top Tips for Reducing Holiday Stress

With a little bit of planning, the holidays can be an enjoyable time. Here are our top tips for reducing stress and making the best of the holiday season.

1. Plan

If you're feeling anxious about everything that needs to get done, write a list, and prioritize. List activities, gifts, parties, food, etc. – anything that you need and want to do.

2. Budget

If you're feeling financial pressure, set a realistic budget that reflects your current financial situation.

3. Be grateful

The holidays aren't supposed to be about money; they're about giving your love, energy, and time, and being grateful for what you have.

4. Set boundaries

These could be physical or emotional. If you don't want to spend time with certain people, don't. If the way someone talks to you is inappropriate, tell them

in a calm and assertive way. Remember that you don't have to do everything, prioritize what's most important to you and let go of the rest.

5. Self-care

Put your mental health first and make sure you have plenty of time to relax and take a moment for yourself.

6. Spend time outdoors

Being outside in the fresh air, getting some sunlight, and walking through the winter scenery is a good way to reduce stress and enjoy the holidays.



Staying Motivated and Dealing with Work Stress

For many workers, November and December are the most stressful times of the year. People find it difficult to balance family and work life during this time; wanting to finish things up before the end of the year, preparing for the festivities, and attending work parties can be difficult to juggle.

According to professor of Human Resource Management at Cass Business School, Chris Rowley 67% of workers were less productive during December and nearly half of respondents admitted doing up to 30% less work. The reasons for this were exhaustion, lack of motivation, and feeling hungover. ([Source](#))

That means, if you're feeling unmotivated and unproductive during December, you're not alone! Go easy on yourself and do the best you can. Your motivation and drive will return in full swing once the new year starts! But here are a few ideas to boost your energy this winter:

- **Plan:** plan the month ahead, prioritize tasks, and make a to-do list.
- **Take time off:** yes, taking a break is good for your productivity! Attend some festive celebrations, some nights off with your loved ones, and enjoy yourself a little.
- **Work-life balance:** keep on track with deadlines and don't over-commit to attending parties and events. Working on a hangover is never fun.
- **Prioritize:** it might be a good idea to plan to attend parties and events where you can meet people from your industry and have a chance to network. Casual events can be a great place to meet new clients! That means you won't have too many commitments and the ones you have might be useful (and hopefully fun)
- **Limit your alcohol consumption:** this way you will avoid feeling hungover, tired, and you'll save money, too!
- **Connect with nature:** research has shown that spending time in nature is beneficial for productivity and concentration, with the added bonus that it makes you feel good.
- **Exercise:** regular exercise is important for physical and mental health, and it helps you to stay focused and energized.



Financial Pressure

For many people, the holidays are a source of financial stress – buying gifts for everyone, decorating your house, and attending festive celebrations can all add up and put a financial strain on individuals and families. That’s why it’s important to plan and track your spending, and to try your best to avoid unnecessary expenses.

Change your mindset

The over-commercialization of the holidays means many people feel pressure to buy expensive gifts and take their loved ones on lavish trips or to fancy restaurants. But remember what the holidays are really about – being grateful for what we have and for the people in our lives, to come together and put aside our differences. The holidays are about giving but it doesn’t have to be material things; you can give your time and energy, and make people feel loved and cared for.

Track your spending

Most people do want to give gifts (and receive gifts in return!) so with a little bit of planning and restriction, the holidays don’t have to break the bank.

Start by creating a budget that reflects your current financial situation. Make a list of all the holiday expenses you can think of, including gifts, food, decorations, travel, etc. This will help you to keep track of what you’re spending and reduce the risk of overspending.

When you're planning and buying gifts, consider options from second-hand shops and keep an eye out for deals and sales. Gifts, cards, and decorations don't have to be expensive, and you can even make your own – it could also be a fun activity to get you into the holiday mood.

Here are a few more tips on how to save money during the holidays:

- Cut back on unnecessary expenses, for example, reuse decorations from previous years
- Christmas trees can be expensive. Consider artificial ones, which you can reuse for years, or make your own tree (there are lots of ideas for this on the internet!)
- If you go out for dinner, eat something at home beforehand and only order a small meal.
- If you consume alcohol, you might try having a healthy festive season without alcohol – this will certainly cut down on expenses!
- Host dinner parties at home instead of eating at restaurants
- If you're hosting a festive meal, why not try something other than turkey – a less expensive (yet delicious!) alternative might be a nice way to spruce things up
- When you're out shopping, remember to stick to your budget and avoid temptations

Set Realistic Expectations

It can be challenging to find a balance between wanting to please everyone and sticking to your budget. That's why you should set realistic expectations with your friends and family. Chances are they're also experiencing financial pressure and would prefer to spend less so why not suggest doing Secret Santa (or equivalent) and/ or setting a group budget for gifts?

Try to avoid the pressure and remember that the most important thing is to spend time with your loved ones and to look after your own well-being.



Family Stress

Many people can't wait to spend time with their family during the holidays, and it's often one of the only occasions when everyone comes together. But for some, spending time with their family or certain family members is a stressful prospect.

That's why it's important to manage your boundaries, set realistic expectations, and to ensure that you take some time for yourself so you can have a break. It's also helpful to remember that it's normal for families to bicker and that it's okay to have disagreements and awkward moments. It doesn't have to be perfect!

Managing Arguments

Approaching the holidays with a mindset of acceptance and an understanding that 'perfect' doesn't exist can be helpful to avoid feeling sad, angry, or disappointed with your family (and/ or friends).

Acknowledge certain family dynamics and prepare a way to manage those. You might have critical parents, a competitive sibling, or an aunt with controversial political views. When someone riles you up, remember that they're often looking for a certain response so try your best to take a deep breath and let it go.

If things start to get heated or uncomfortable, you can always take some time out. Maybe go for a walk or call a friend, or do some deep breathing in another room.

Boundaries

Setting boundaries is important for every family and relationship. Plan beforehand what you're willing to tolerate and where you draw the line. It might be certain conversations, such as politics or climate change, or it might relate to the way certain others treat you.

Prioritize your own feelings and needs, and if something bothers you, address it in a calm and straightforward manner. For example, 'please stop questioning my choice of career/studies' or 'it hurts my feelings when you comment on my weight so please stop'.

For the sake of harmony and togetherness, aim for reconciliation, putting aside differences, and 'agreeing to disagree'. This might not always work but it might be worth a try!

Here are a few more tips for reducing tension during the holidays:

- Avoid or limit your alcohol consumption
- Plan activities to avoid boredom-based bickering. You could go for a walk, play board games, or watch a movie together.
- Divide tasks. If only one person bears the festive chores, it's likely they'll get overwhelmed and stressed. Ask for help and offer your help.



Loneliness During the Holidays

Many people spend the holidays alone or away from friends and family. This can be upsetting and stressful as this time of year is promoted as being about spending time with your family and friends. This can be difficult for people who are isolated or don't have people they can or want to spend time with. So here are some tips on how to deal with loneliness and make the best of the holiday season.

Plan a nice day for yourself

Remember that many people spend the holidays alone – you're not alone in that. So it might be helpful to plan a nice day for yourself by making some tasty food, watching your favorite movie, doing some art, or reading a book. If you enjoy the outdoors, you could wrap up warm and go for a long walk in the forest or park.

Connect with friends and family virtually or over the phone

If you're unable to be with your loved ones in person, you could still connect with them virtually or over the phone. You could plan a video call, exchange videos and photos, or play games together online. Making the effort to connect will make you feel better and reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Get Involved in Your Community

There are likely many events and activities happening in your local community during the holiday season. You could volunteer at a local soup kitchen or food bank. This is a great way to help those in need and meet new people.

Do Something for Someone Else

Random acts of kindness will make you and the other person feel good. You could send someone a letter of appreciation or gratitude, bake cookies for your neighbor, or help someone with their shopping. Doing nice things for others will help you to put your problems aside and make you feel good about yourself.

If you know of someone who will spend the holidays alone, why not invite them over for tea or some food? Or give them a visit to check in and see if they're okay.



Beating the Winter Blues

When there's less sunlight, the body and brain respond in a way that can make you feel low and tired. The main theory is that lack of sunlight reduces the activity of the hypothalamus. This is a structure in the brain associated with keeping your body in a state of balance by directly affecting your hormones and nervous system.

When this happens, the production of melatonin increases, and serotonin levels drop. Melatonin is responsible for making you feel sleepy so when there are higher levels of this hormone, you feel more tired. Lower levels of serotonin can negatively affect your mood, change your appetite and sleep, and reduce your motivation to socialize. The lack of sunlight also throws off your internal clock (circadian rhythm) and can make you feel unbalanced and disorientated.

Going back to the hunter-gatherer days, our natural response to cold weather and dark days was to sleep, reduce our activity and social contact, and stay in our shelter. It's a natural response for the body to conserve energy and ensure our survival – of course, nowadays we have heating, artificial light, and warm clothes but our body may still react in a similar way.

Feeling like this can be difficult during the holiday season as we're expected to feel happy and cheerful, and to go out to parties and other festive celebrations. So it can be helpful to remember what's happening in your body and brain, and put less pressure on yourself to go out if you feel like staying under the blanket!

Feeling a little low or tired is normal but the symptoms of depression can be quite severe for some people. In this case, it could be that you have 'winter depression' or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

Seasonal Affective Disorder

It's estimated that around 2-3% of Canadians will experience SAD in their lifetime. The symptoms are similar to those of depression but it occurs during the fall and winter months.

Some of the symptoms include:

- Feeling tired and sleepy most of the time or having trouble sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Feeling sad, guilty, and hopeless
- Increased irritability
- Avoiding people and activities you normally enjoy
- Losing interest in sex
- Suicidal thoughts

To be diagnosed with this disorder, you must be experiencing these symptoms most of the time for more than two weeks. It's important not to diagnose yourself but to seek the advice of a health professional. They can talk you through treatment options as well.

Let the Light Shine In

Morning light helps your body adjust faster and synchronizes your biological clock. Morning light also increases your mood and alertness during the day and helps you sleep better at night. With Vancouver's shorter winter days, and rainy weather, it may be wise to invest in a full spectrum white light lamp or a sunrise clock to help you get the morning light exposure you need.

Mood-boosting Exercises

Here are a few exercises you can try that will reduce negative thoughts and feelings of sadness or stress, and boost your mood.

Gratitude diary

Feeling grateful for what we have, rather than focusing on what we don't have is a great way to get into the holiday spirit. Write down 3-5 things that you're grateful for every day, or as often as possible. If you're stuck for things to write down, focus on the little things that put a smile on your face like 'I'm grateful for the delicious cup of coffee I had today' or 'I'm grateful for the beautiful plant in my room'.

Affirmations

Positive affirmations are statements about yourself that you repeat again and again until you start to believe them! It's often a good idea to turn a negative belief or thought you have about yourself into a positive or more helpful statement about yourself. For example, instead of saying 'I always fail', the affirmation could be 'I have succeeded at many things in my life'.

Write down 5-10 affirmations and stick them somewhere you can see them daily. Repeat them as often as possible and with conviction! They should be written in the first person and in the present tense.

Visualization

As a human, you've been gifted with an extremely powerful tool: your imagination. You can imagine what already exists, like the past or what your bedroom looks like, and what doesn't yet exist, such as the future. Usually, this is coupled with emotions, where imagining positive things will bring about positive emotions, and imagining negative things will create negative emotions.

To visualize, it's easiest to have your eyes closed and either sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Take a moment to scan your body and follow the natural rhythm of your breath. Then use the power of your imagination to boost your mood using any of the following:

- Remember something that makes you feel happy, relaxed, supported, or strong
- Bring to mind something that made you laugh
- Picture the future you want, the kind of person you want to be, and the kind of relationships you want to have

When you do this, try to make the image in your mind as vivid as possible, and imagine it from different aspects or positions. Don't worry if your mind wanders – that's normal! Whenever you notice that your mind has wandered, just bring it back to the point of focus.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the act of paying attention to the present moment with an open and non-judgmental attitude. It means being aware of your thoughts and emotions without getting wrapped up in them. When you're mindful, you're able to savor the good moments and let go of the bad ones. Here are a few ways you can practice mindfulness this holiday season:

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and focus on your breathing. Just follow the natural rhythm of your breath, without trying to change it.
2. Go for a mindful walk, pay attention to the feeling of your feet on the ground, the icy breeze, and the things you see, smell, and hear.

3. When you're talking to someone, really listen to what they're saying instead of thinking about what you're going to say next or drifting off into your thoughts.
4. Eat or drink something mindfully. Pay attention to the way it tastes and smells, to the texture, and how it feels. You can choose anything, including a festive cookie!



Festive Activities for Creative People

If you need to take a break from anything creative or film-related this holiday season, go ahead and enjoy some time off. But if you're looking for creative ways to get into the holiday spirit, here are a few ideas:

1. Drawing or sketching

Holiday-inspired drawing or sketching can be a nice way to get you into a holiday mood and refresh your creative juices. You could do one a day and watch as you progress.

2. Handmade greeting cards

If you're sending out cards, why not put a little bit of time aside to create your own? The cards can be simple and easy to make, and the recipients will enjoy the effort you made. You could also make gift tags or notes if you're not one to send out cards.

3. Handmade gifts

Some people on your gift-giving list would love to receive a self-made gift or a piece of your art. Giving handmade gifts makes the recipient feel special and cared for.

4. Photography

Are you interested in photography or have always wanted to give it a try? Take some 'artistic' pictures of the winter landscape or festive themes.

5. Baking and cooking

Even if you've never done it before, baking or cooking something festive is a great way to get creative and do something nice for other people.

6. Decorating

Let your creativity run wild and think about how to make your place feel festive. You can make decorations yourself and use them for yourself or gift them to someone you love.



10 (Other) Ways to Reduce Holiday Stress

Here is a list of more ideas and ways to reduce holiday stress and winter blues, and get you into the holiday spirit.

1. Stretch

Set aside a few minutes a day to do some stretches or yoga. This will allow you to take a moment for yourself, focus on your body, and help you to deal with the rushing around.

2. Give yourself a gift

Treat yourself to something nice. It could be a new book, a cozy jumper, or a plant. Or it could be a day at the spa or a trip to an art gallery – whatever will put a smile on your face!

3. Light candles

Candles can have a relaxing and comforting effect, making the room feel cozy and warm. Take a moment to relax, take a bath, and light some candles.

4. Read a new book

Reading a non-fiction book about a topic that interests you and learning something new will give you a little boost in your mood. Delving into a great story will help you to de-stress and focus on something else.

5. Take a break from technology

Put down your phone, laptop, and other screens for a few hours. Forget about social media, emails, and messages, and just allow yourself to be for a moment.

6. Journal

Write down your thoughts, worries, and hopes for the future. Journaling is a great way to release tension and pent-up emotions. It might give you the chance to reflect on the year that's passed and make plans for the year to come.

7. Learn to say no

Saying no is not a bad thing and will help you to avoid becoming overwhelmed this holiday season. Put yourself and your needs first so if you don't feel like going out, say no; if you're being asked to take on more than you can handle, say no. Setting boundaries can help you to avoid unnecessary stress.

8. Connect with nature

This can mean going outside but it can also involve tending to your houseplants, listening to nature sounds, watching a nature documentary, or visualizing natural scenery.

9. Exercise

Doing regular exercise will release feel-good hormones in your brain and get you feeling energized. It could be going out for a hike or cycle, joining the gym, or doing yoga with your friends.

10. Limit alcohol and other substances

Alcohol is a natural depressant. To avoid feeling hungover, lethargic, sad, and reduce the amount you spend, consider cutting out or back your alcohol consumption. The same goes for other substances such as nicotine and illicit drugs.



Holiday Stress Buster Checklist

Holiday Stress Buster Checklist

To finish off this guide, here is a checklist of all the things that will help you to stay calm and collected this holiday season, and allow you to enjoy yourself a little bit!

- Take a break from work if you need it
- Prioritize tasks, and find a good work-holiday balance
- Keep track of your spending and stick to your budget
- Remember, it's the thought that counts!
- Plan your gifts and meals
- Start shopping as early as possible
- Avoid impulse buying
- Delegate and divide tasks – you don't have to do everything!
- Take a break from technology and social media
- Smile and have a laugh
- Celebrate yourself, your friends, and family
- Spend time in nature
- Slow down and enjoy just being for a while
- If you need a break, take 10 minutes to yourself
- Declutter or clean your home (if you have time and energy!)
- Book a house cleaner
- Try a random act of kindness
- Think about and focus on what you're grateful for

- Focus on what you do have, rather than on what you don't have
- Learn or try something new
- Listen to festive music (if you like it!)
- Set and maintain your boundaries



Final Thoughts

The holidays can be a time of extra stress and anxiety without proper planning, prioritization, and managing your expectations. It can also be a time to switch off from work, take a well-deserved break, and enjoy being with friends and family. You might use it as an opportunity to do things you don't usually have time for like reading a book, learning a new skill, or doing something creative like arts and crafts.

Remember to let go of perfectionism and the idea that there is such a thing as the 'perfect' holiday season. Practice acceptance and mindfulness with difficult relatives, and stick to your boundaries. If you put your mental health first, and prioritize what's important to you – rather than what you feel you should do – you can feel more relaxed and enjoy yourself.

Aim to spend as much time as possible outdoors so you can get some sunlight and fresh air. Connecting with nature will help to improve your mood and energy levels, and enable you to connect to yourself and your body. Exercise, be mindful, and try to focus on the things you do like about the holidays!