

Stress Management December 2020

Relationships & Stress

You cannot underestimate the power of healthy relationships during the holidays. Between the hustle and bustle of the holiday season and navigating a pandemic, your relationships might fall by the wayside. Finding time to strengthen your bond with your partner, friends, and family is crucial to your well-being.

Having strong social relationships may help reduce stress and heart-related risks. Loneliness and social isolation are linked to poorer health, depression, and increased risk of early death. It is recommended to socialize when you are feeling stress. Social interaction can decrease the damage stress can do to your physical and mental health. Remember, you don't have to handle your stress alone.

Your instinct might be to keep it to yourself as an attempt to shield your family or partner from your grumpiness. But that isn't always the best route. Talking about your stress with your partner is a valuable opportunity for connection and visibility. There is a feeling of bonding and closeness that comes from coping with stress together.

Holidays are about bringing friends and family together. Don't let the holiday stress prevent you from communicating with your inner circle. If the day gets overwhelming and you feel crushed under your to-do list, don't be afraid to send a distress signal. If you're on the receiving end of someone else's distress signal, heed it.

Sometimes it takes a new perspective to tackle stress during the holidays. While stress may have negative effects on your body, stress hormones can also encourage caregiving, cooperation, and compassion. The very thing that threatens your connection with your partner, friends, and family can bring you closer together.



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Active Listening Exercise

We often listen to a conversation with a friend or loved one without really hearing them. This is a missed opportunity to connect, and could even make someone feel neglected or disrespected. The exercise below can help you actively express interest in what the other person has to say, and make them feel heard.

Start by finding a conversation partner and a quiet place where you can talk without interruption or distraction. Invite this person to share what's on their mind. As they do so, try to follow the steps below.

- Paraphrase.** Once the other person has finished expressing a thought, paraphrase what they said to make sure you understand, and to show that you are paying attention. Helpful ways to paraphrase include “What I hear you saying is...,” “It sounds like...,” and “If I understand you right...”
- Ask questions.** When appropriate, ask questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on their thoughts and feelings. Ask questions to clarify their meaning, such as, “When you say _____, do you mean _____?”
- Express empathy.** If the other person voices negative feelings, strive to validate these feelings rather than questioning or defending against them. You might respond, “I can sense that you’re feeling frustrated,” and even “I can understand how that situation could cause frustration.”
- Use engaged body language.** Make eye contact, nod, face the other person, and maintain an open and relaxed body posture. Avoid distractions in your environment or checking your phone. Be mindful of your facial expressions.
- Avoid judgment.** Your goal is to understand the other person’s perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it. Try not to interrupt with counter-arguments or mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking.

Take turns. After the other person has had a chance to speak and you have engaged in the active listening steps above, ask if it's okay for you to share your perspective.

Take this [quiz](#) to find out how stressed you are, and learn ways to cope. These [36 questions](#) can bring you closer to loved ones, even if you're separated. Read this [article](#) for more information about the importance of socializing.