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SIMON SHERRY: Eights tips for banishing Christmas stress

'Tis the season to be overwhelmed, but it doesn't have to be

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By Simon Sherry

It's the "most wonderful time of the year" again. However, for many, the holiday season is not as wonderful as the songs and stories would lead you to believe. In theory, Christmas is supposed to be merry and bright. In reality, people are often left feeling stressed, panicked, lonely, hassled and pressured.

To sum up the Christmas experience, just look at Santa. He is our secular icon this time of year, but he is stressed out; he is time-pressured; and he is a binge eater.

Here are a few simple tips to help ease the holiday pressure you may be feeling:

1. Focus on connection and family rather than commercial aspects of Christmas. It is easy to get caught up in buying gifts, decorations and party favours — filling up on the commercial aspects of Christmas will only leave you feeling emptier. Shift your focus to experiences and connections with people you care about rather than getting more “things.”

2. Balance food and alcohol consumption. Binge eating and drinking are commonplace at Christmas, but they can have negative impacts on your mood and your waistline. With high levels of stress added to the overindulgence of food and alcohol, the holidays tend to see a spike in heart attacks and an increase in alcohol-related fatalities caused by drinking and driving. It is important to take part in special family traditions but do your best to balance your food and your alcohol intake and never drink and drive.

3. Get exercise. This time of year, your social calendar fills up, you disrupt your daily work routine and colder temperatures set in. These factors combined mean it can be harder to fit in daily exercise. This holiday season, make a conscious effort to get moving. Consider activities like going skating with your children, a winter hike with your friends or a bowling party with your co-workers. Exercise will help relieve that feeling of tension and stress.

4. Enjoy daylight. The days are getting shorter and the daylight scarcer. The lack of daylight is known to have a negative effect on your mood and can impact your sleep pattern. Getting outside and soaking in daylight hours can really help you deal with the stress and anxiety of Christmas.

5. Relax. Take some time to relax and do what you enjoy. Calming your nervous system, even for 20 minutes, will help you feel less stressed throughout the day. You can achieve this by reading a book, doing yoga, watching your favourite show, riding a bike, playing with your grandkids or going ice fishing. Making a conscious effort to fit in some activities that you enjoy will help you to relax.

6. Set realistic expectations for yourself and your family. Keep your goals and expectations in check. That means avoiding overscheduling yourself or buying gifts that are way out of your price range. It means asking for help cooking Christmas dinner or bringing store-bought cookies to the office work party. Understand your limits and do not take on more than you can reasonably accomplish.

7. Limit harmful upward social comparisons. Keeping up with the Joneses and Christmas tend to go together. Whether it is making sure you have the nicest decorations on the block, having a better party than your ex, wearing the best ugly Christmas sweater, or showing off the latest iPhone 13 Max Pro, we are always sizing up how we compare to those in our social circle. It is best to keep your competitive side in check and find gratitude in what you have.

Social media can also worsen this feeling of comparison because people tend to post their “perfect” selves online. If you find yourself endlessly scrolling through social media and longing for what others have, it may be time to take a break from your device and find another activity to occupy your time.

8. Give up control and perfection. Inevitably our lives are less than perfect. If you had great expectations and things do not go as planned, try to make the most of the situation. Trying to micromanage and control every detail and person around you will only drive up your stress and your anxiety levels and drive people away.

From my family, to yours, we wish you a merry Christmas and a safe and happy New Year.

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