

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Holiday Stress

Employer Tips to Help Your Employee's Season Be a Little More Merry and Bright

By Dr. Joel Axler, *National Behavior Health Leader*



The holiday season is filled with activities to bring us together and help spread joy and happiness to others. However, the holiday season can also be stressful, and with the additional strain from the pandemic over the past few years, everyday stressors can have a larger impact on your employee's mental and physical health.

We all feel stressed from time to time, but the holidays offer their own special strains that can pervade into the workplace and lead to a reduction in productivity. It is important for managers and HR supervisors to understand how to help identify and address issues stemming from employee's holiday stress in the workplace.

There are warning signals that indicate that an employee may be experiencing higher-than-normal holiday anxiety. These signs can all be indicators of increased stress.

- Change in behavior, such as increased sensitivity and anger
- Lack of focus or concentration
- Change in quality of work performance
- Unusual tension with peers and teammates or withdrawn behaviors
- Change in appearance or hygiene
- Increased tardiness or absenteeism

Opportunities for Employers to Provide Support to Help with Holiday Stress

Employers are becoming increasingly focused on the well-being of their workforce—physically, financially and emotionally. Guiding employees to the services available through your benefits program is a critical communication opportunity to connect employees to the resources they may need to help them through the holiday season.

- 1 Enhance Well-Being Programs.** Incorporate wellness breaks to allow employees to refocus, such as a walk outside or access to meditation series and yoga. Encourage employees to stay home when sick to help mitigate the spread of illness in the workplace and give employees information on how to help them stay healthy.



2 Support Time Off and Flexible Working Arrangements. Many employees may need increased flexibility in work-from-home arrangements, alternative work schedules, etc. Encourage employees to seek work/life balance, including time away. Remind employees they have options, including talking to their manager if they need time to cope with family issues. Help employees prioritize projects to manage deadlines that might be causing added stress.

3 Create Internal Networking Groups. Many employers have Employee Resource Groups for like-minded colleagues to strengthen communities and provide support. Motivate employees to work together as a team to share the workload, connect with one another, share ideas and receive peer-to-peer support—and help them feel more connected to one another and your company.

4 Lean on Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Often an under-promoted and under-utilized benefit, your EAP can offer meaningful support to employees concerned with their emotional well-being. These confidential and no-cost opportunities to be connected with mental health professionals, helpful resources in your community and more can be a lifeline for a struggling employee.

5 Reinforce Mental Health and Substance Abuse Coverage. If needs extend beyond what your EAP can provide, be sure employees understand benefits coverage for mental health and substance use disorder services if they are enrolled in your medical plan. Benefits generally include behavioral health treatment like psychotherapy and counseling, mental health inpatient services and treatment for substance use disorder.

Tips for Employees

Being realistic, practicing positive self-talk and identifying your own limits can help ward off stress and depression. Below are some practical tips to minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays.



Acknowledge Your Feelings. Give yourself permission to take time for yourself and express your feelings. You can't force yourself to feel merry and bright just because it is the holiday season. It is appropriate to be comfortable sharing your feelings and learning to say "no." Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, consider removing something else from your to-do list. A work-home balance should be a priority.



Set Realistic Expectations. The holidays don't have to be perfect. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to and be open to creating new ones. Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't meet your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. Even though your holiday plans may look different this year, you can find ways to celebrate.



Plan Ahead and Stick to a Budget. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. Make sure to line up help for meal prep and cleanup. Before you do your gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend—then stick to your budget. Set up a family gift exchange or give homemade gifts, which makes them more meaningful and affordable.



Connect to Others. If you feel lonely or isolated, seek community, religious or other social events or communities offering support and companionship. If you're feeling sad during the holidays, it also may help to talk to a friend or family member about your concerns. Try reaching out with a text, call or video chat. Volunteering your time or doing something to help others is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. For example, consider dropping off a meal and dessert at a friend's home during the holidays.



Maintain Healthy Habits. Try to eat healthy meals and avoid going overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Get plenty of sleep and include regular physical activity in your daily routine. Try deep-breathing exercises, meditation or yoga. Find an activity you enjoy that helps reduce stress by clearing your mind and restoring inner calm. Be aware of how the information culture can produce undue stress and adjust your time reading news and social media as you see fit.

Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. With some planning and positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays. Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, seek professional help and talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.



About the Author

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Axler is a board-certified child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist with more than 30 years of experience in academic, private practice and insurance settings. He is a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He serves on executive committees of organizations, including the National Council for Behavioral Health, the Georgia Psychiatric Physicians Association and the Georgia Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.



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