

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Holiday Stress: Let it Go! Let it Go!

Coldwater, MI. Winter holidays—do they fill you with joy or with worries about gift-giving and family gatherings? Are you fretful over weather, travel and money? If you're feeling stressed out over the holidays, the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency wants to encourage you to take a few moments to learn how holiday stress affects your health and how you can control it.

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Stress can give you a rush of energy when it's needed most (i.e., cooking and cleaning for holiday guests). The hormones and other chemicals released when under stress prepare you for action. You breathe faster, your heartbeat quickens, blood sugar rises to give you energy, and your brain uses more oxygen as it shifts into high alert.

But if stress lasts a long time—a condition known as chronic stress—those “high-alert” changes become harmful rather than helpful. “Stress clearly promotes higher levels of inflammation, which is thought to contribute to too many diseases of aging. Inflammation has been linked to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, arthritis, frailty, and functional decline,” says Laura Sutter, Coordinator for Area Agency on Aging for Branch and St. Joseph Counties. She adds “Stress affects the body's immune system, which then weakens your response to vaccines and impairs wound healing.”

““For some, the holidays can be a depressing time. Feelings of loss, loneliness, and anger can intensify when contrasted with the joy expected of the holidays.” says Dr. Sue Pattison, Primary Care Psychologist with Sturgis Hospital. “Be sure to spend time

with people who care about you, have realistic expectations, set limits when necessary, and cultivate an attitude of gratitude when attempting to ward off the blues”

Unfortunately, most people tend to do the worst things that are not at all helpful to their health. For instance, stressed out people may tend to isolate themselves and not seek social support. Exercise is a great stress reducer. But when people are stressed, exercise becomes less common and/or choosing not to exercise is seen as a time saver. Of course, stressed people are more likely to indulge in convenience food and consume more empty calories instead of preparing nutritious meals, which may require more planning.

Research has shown that those who are stressed burn fewer calories and produce more of the hormone insulin, which enhances fat storage. Stress may actually contribute to weight gain and obesity.

Getting enough sleep is also key to stress relief—although stress itself can interfere with sleep. To improve sleep habits, be sure to go to bed the same time each night and get up the same time each morning, and limit the use of light-emitting electronics like computers and smartphones before bed.

Beyond recommendations for exercise, healthy diet, social contacts, and getting enough sleep, taking time for meditative practices can effectively relieve stress. To learn more about how meditation can help, pick up a book or invest in a yoga class.

Another way to deal with stress? Consider talking with a health care provider or mental health professional. Medications or other therapies might help you cope. In the long run, reducing stress may help you to slow down and enjoy your time with the people and activities you really care about. And isn't that really what the holidays are all about?

To Reduce Stress

- **Get enough sleep.**
- **Exercise regularly.** Just 30 minutes a day of walking can boost mood and reduce stress.
- **Build a social support network.**
- **Set priorities.** Decide what must get done and what can wait. Say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.
- **Think positive.** Note what you've accomplished at the end of the day, not what you've failed to do.
- **Try relaxation methods.** Mindfulness, meditation, yoga, or tai chi may help.
- **Seek help.** Talk to a mental health professional if you feel unable to cope, have suicidal thoughts, or use drugs or alcohol to cope.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the toll-free, 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

Visit our website at <http://www.bhsj.org/> to learn more health and wellness tips that can help you meet your fitness goals.

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