

SURVIVING, AND EVEN ENJOYING, THE HECTIC HOLIDAY SEASON*By Nicole McNulty, certified recreation therapist, Behavioral Health Services, Overlake Hospital Medical Center*

The holidays are in full swing and many of us may be feeling more Grinch-like than we care to admit. Most of us hope for the holidays to be filled with merriment and joy, but the reality can be far different as we struggle with limited time and much to do, including parties, shopping and family demands. Compound this reality with the holiday blues, which many of us have a very real tendency to experience, and this can be a challenging season on multiple levels.

Many women, in particular, feel the brunt of the work involved in orchestrating a good experience for others. For mothers of children still living at home, this can lead to family stress as energy and tempers run short. Family finances can be stretched uncomfortably in an effort to satisfy the wish lists of children, which adds to the strain. Many people have trouble sleeping and also experience other symptoms of anxiety, such as headaches, overeating, excessive drinking, fatigue and tension.

By setting realistic limits and taking good care of yourself, you can survive, and even enjoy this holiday season. There are several simple but effective recommendations to keep in mind. First and foremost, make every effort to get enough sleep. When people cut corners on their sleep, they find themselves less able to handle the pace and strain of the season. Irritability and poorer health are the result, leaving individuals ill equipped to react well to stress. Keep a consistent bedtime, allowing for six to eight hours of sleep. Implementing a relaxing ritual, such as reading, taking a warm bath or deep breathing, can help you unwind and get to sleep on time.

Make an effort to maintain good health habits. A steady diet rich in vegetables and fruit and low in saturated fats will help your body function well and perform effectively in fighting off bacterial and viral infections. A big challenge during the holidays comes from the additional food choices, opportunities to

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overeating, and celebrations centered on high-calorie, rich foods. Drinking more water, watching your caffeine and sugar intake, and eating smaller, lighter meals can also help you keep your energy up to tackle the next holiday party or project. If you are going to a holiday party, have a healthy snack (like yogurt, string cheese or salad) before you head out so you don't fill up on calorie- and fat-laden food. Members of the Bellevue Club are already devoted to exercise and wellness, so remember to keep these good habits in place, even when time is more limited.

Find time for yourself to recharge your mental and emotional batteries. Many people need quiet time alone to read, walk and reflect to renew their focus and to relieve stress. Others find their spirits replenished through time talking over tea with a good friend, or playing games with their children. Listening to music, hiking, gardening, watching movies or theater can all be renewing. Despite the fast pace, finding time for yourself and for things you love to do can transform your outlook and enable you to deal with added stressors more gracefully and energetically.

To trim your schedule, take stock of what activities you truly enjoy and treasure during each season and make those a priority. All other invitations and activities should fall to the bottom of your list, or be removed from your calendar altogether. It is okay to say, "No, thank you" to extra obligations or activities. Maybe instead of hosting a Christmas party for your extended family, think about having a New Year's party instead, or even move the gathering to later in January.

Gift giving can be simplified for many families. You may decide to give only to the younger generation rather than including all adults in a family. For families with children at home, involve the younger ones in teaching the meaning of giving by adopting a needy family and having the kids help prepare a meal or buy a small gift. However you engage in giving this holiday season, know your spending limits. Overspending will create stress not only during the holidays, but also for months afterward.

According to the National Mental Health Association, the incidence of depression is higher over the holidays, and it is generally thought that unrealistic expectations, fatigue, time and financial pressures all contribute to the holiday blues. Another contributor is missing loved ones either because of a physical absence or death. Reflecting on past events and losses can pack an emotional punch that is difficult to overcome, with feelings ranging from mild sadness to severe depression. Severe depression requires immediate medical help. If you are feeling lower than normal this holiday season, or your ability to eat, sleep or perform routine activities is significantly impaired, you should contact a health-care provider immediately. Call your primary-care provider or contact Overlake's Behavioral Health Services at 688-5460 for an evaluation.