

IT'S BEGINNING TO FEEL A LOT LIKE STRESSMAS

Dr. Stephen Kaufman [Ghost-written by Gary Bridgman]

Congratulations! You survived Thanksgiving, the Egg Bowl and the first, furious weekend of holiday shopping. But that was only the first round of what is often an unhealthy season, known half-jokingly as "Stressmas." Just because five short weeks bring us Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah, New Year's, midterm exams and post-season football doesn't mean we have to be stressed out, overweight and depressed. What causes most of this stress? It's the anticipation and expectation for "all good things" to happen. In addition, the change in routine schedules for meals, sleep and socializing put stress on general health.

This is not a sermon on dieting and exercise. I've been in the fitness and wellness field long enough to know that few people have the time or willpower to begin new diets and exercise regimens in such a hectic time. Save your promises and planning for New Years resolutions and the first Monday in January (when the nation's health clubs are flooded with earnest new fitness buffs). Here are a few realistic suggestions for keeping Father Stressmas from getting stuck in your chimney:

1. Don't compare what you do with what friends and relatives do. There will always be someone who can do or give more.
2. Don't become a Stressmas Martyr and do it all yourself (akin to Mother of the Bride syndrome).
3. You can let some things slide, even the diet, the laundry, the vacuuming and especially things beyond your control.
4. Don't overspend. It's easy to do this time of the year, but when you spend more than you can afford, you prolong the stress of Christmas into the next year.
5. Meditate or have a regular spiritual quiet time, or take a class in relaxation and stretching techniques -- like Tai Chi or Yoga.
6. Eat nutritional food (it's still available this time of year, after all). Decrease the amount of fat and sugar you eat.
7. Cut back on caffeinated beverages.



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8. Rest. Try to get eight hours of sleep each day.
9. Get a massage. A massage can be beneficial for the mind and body.

On the 10th Day of Stressmas, exercise. Often, we neglect our exercise regimen during November and December, with good intentions to get back on track during the new year. Exercise helps your body release tension and relieve mental and physical fatigue caused by stress.

Deep breathing exercises. As you are sitting or lying down, take a deep breath in and count to 8. Exhale slowly to a count of 8. Repeat this several times to calm your body so you can deal with a stressful situation with a clear mind. I used to recommend counting to 10, but who has the time anymore?

Neck and shoulder exercises. Try these while creeping down Goodman Ave. at rush hour. Ease that tightness in your neck and shoulders by shrugging your shoulders up and down slowly and rolling them back. Relieve tension in your neck by slowly turning the head to look from side to side. Then gently tilt the head bringing the right ear toward the right shoulder. Repeat on the left.

A brisk walk. If the weather allows, put on a pair of walking shoes and go for a quick 10-minute walk. Remember how good this felt right after your Thanksgiving meal? This allows your body to release muscle tension and remove excess levels of chemicals caused by stress.

Put exercise into everyday tasks. While fitness programs are beneficial, it's easy to add exercise by just changing the patterns of your life. Do things like parking as far as away from the shopping centers as possible. Don't drive around looking for the closest place to the front door. This trick adds exercise to your day and reduces the "lot rage" encountered in the front lanes.

Just [keep] doing it. (To borrow from Nike) While the holiday season is not the best time to begin a new exercise regimen, it is a terrible time to neglect whatever routine you are already on.