



Holiday **STRESS** on Women and their Families

1. What is the effect of stress on the body?

Stress is the body's reaction to perceived circumstances that excite a person. It's about a high activation in your nervous system that is telling your body that you are preparing for a huge effort such as fighting that saber-tooth tiger. Your sympathetic nervous system acts outside of conscious awareness to assist you in this effort, and symptoms of this preparation are stress responses.

- (1) Sore, tense muscles with no unusual physical effort: this means that there is over-activation of the skeletal muscles--a common reaction to stress. Tension may show up in the shoulders, lower back, and jaws. Over-activation may lead to tension headaches, jaw clenching, teeth grinding, and back pain.
- (2) Chronically cold hands and feet: Blood flow is contracting, as it should when preparing to fight saber tooth tigers and managing stress in the 21st century. This is an early component of the "fight-flight-freeze" responses of the sympathetic nervous system, which is gearing up.
- (3) Difficulty breathing: short, shallow breaths indicate preparation in the respiratory system.
- (4) Moist, sweaty palms: this means that the sweat glands have been over-activated.
- (5) Constant worry: Worry is obsessive thinking about something one can't do anything about at the moment. Remembered or imagined events can affect the nervous system physiologically in very similar ways to actual external events, and so worry may over-activate the nervous system.
- (6) Over-reactions: Tension leads to getting angry easily, getting feelings hurt, and generally emotional upheavals at a time when most people don't want to react and cause discomfort in the family.

2. Why does stress become an issue at this holiday time of the year?

Some stress at holiday time comes from unrealistic hopes and expectations of a "perfect," warm, cheerful Norman Rockwell holiday experience. It is far less

stressful to accept that there are sometimes issues that keep people distant with each other, and sometimes, especially at holiday time. Give yourself permission to feel sad, guilty, or unhappy for small chunks of time--and then shift to a modest ambivalence about the situation you are facing.

Some other stress at holiday time is based on all the increased activities that appear before us. For these challenges we recommend the following:

- **Setting Priorities:** Select as a family the activities that are most meaningful for you and your children, and focus on those. Share cooking responsibilities. Say "no" to events that do not fit your plans.
- **Planning Ahead:** Make lists of things to do, and set aside time each day for them. Consider a cut-off date--after which what hasn't been done just doesn't get done.
- **Keeping it all Simple:** Keep your holiday simple and avoid elaborate. Do pot-luck; do shop on line from home.
- **Staying within Budget:** Say "no" to budget busters! Choose thoughtful over expensive.
- **Taking Care of Yourself:** Give yourself time for renewal at various times of each day--not to fret about what hasn't been done, but rather to contemplate the meaning of this time of year.

3. What Else to do for Yourself

Develop a Self Care Plan for the holidays! Include a few daily activities that will slow you down, help you relax, and reduce your stress: listening to music; meditating; taking a quick walk. The key here is to create a list before things get hectic, and then you can turn to the list when you need it.

Remember to watch your nutrition and maintain good eating habits; extra B vitamins may be helpful for some people. Be sure to get some vigorous exercise as much as you can. Beware alcohol. And especially make sure to cultivate fun and laughter in your household!