



Sue Ann says: This really *can* be the best time of the year

Every year I approach the holidays with a mixture of joy and utter dread. I eagerly anticipate the family time, sharing the magic with our little grandchildren and, of course, all the yummy treats. But oh, the relief when we pack the season away for another year.

If the holidays really are “the best time of the year,” as the time-honored song insists, then why are so many women stressed before they’ve even hung the mistletoe? I talked about it with my dear friend, Teresa Woods MD, an assistant professor of Psychiatry with the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health’s Department of Psychiatry.

And it turns out that darn “best time of the year” song, and others like it, have a lot to do with the stress women feel during the holidays. Dr. Woods said that societal norms, reinforced by all those songs and advertisements and Donna Reed movies, make women believe that we have to feel a certain way and perform to unrealistic standards. During this season, we *have* to bake 20 dozen cookies for the PTA, volunteer for the church supper, host the office party, prepare an elaborate family feast, deck the halls and find the perfect gifts. We have to *do it all* – and be of good cheer while we’re doing it – because it is our responsibility to make it merry and perfect for everyone else. So we rush, we obsess and we run ourselves ragged ... until we are run into the ground. Then we are guilty because we failed to live up to these societal norms. And we feel even more stressed. And exhausted, depressed, angry, maybe even physically sick.

Dr. Woods says these societal expectations, these “coulda, shoulda, gottas” can lead to profound health problems. Women often shrug off their fatigue or illness as “just stress.” They don’t understand the huge role stress plays in our physical and mental health.

“Never hang a ‘just’ in front of stress,” Dr. Woods emphasizes. “Stress can kill you.”

It’s shocking but true. Heart disease, the leading cause of death for women in the US, is directly connected to stress. Stroke. High blood pressure. Headaches, stomachaches and insomnia. Not to mention anxiety disorders – which women are about twice as likely to develop as men.

So how do we manage all this stress? Dr. Woods says to begin at the beginning, with the basics of a healthy diet, regular exercise and a good night's sleep.

It's also important to change our thinking. "We tend to see stress as something that happens to us," Dr. Woods says, "In reality, we choose what we are going to let stress us and how stressed we are going to be. Our minds are far more powerful in combating stress than we realize."

Dr. Woods' tips:

- Become aware of your stressors. Eliminate and delegate what you can.
- If you can't change the stressor, change your reaction to it. "It's like we're a boat, and the waves hitting the boat are the stress," Dr. Woods explains. "We can decide if we can set another course to sail out of the waves. We also decide what our ship is made of, how sturdy it is, and just how much stress it can handle before it sinks."
- Learn to identify your stress signals. Butterflies in the stomach? Over eating? Temper-prone? "Once we know what our stress signals are we can pinpoint an intervention so stress doesn't take over," Dr. Woods advises.
- Split big jobs into smaller tasks. They won't seem so insurmountable, and you'll feel a sense of accomplishment as you complete each one.
- Try deep breathing exercises and soothing mental imagery for at least a few minutes several times a day.

Try these tips to make your holidays something you truly enjoy, not something you have to get through. Decide what's most important and let go of the rest. Take a cue from the little ones in your life. They know what the big stuff is: cuddling up by the fireplace to read a favorite holiday story. Sneaking a bite of the reindeers' cookies. Singing loud. Catching snowflakes on your tongue. This is what "sets the hearts a-glowing." This is what creates family memories that last a lifetime.

All of us here at the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation wish you and your family a very happy holiday. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

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