YOUR HOLIDAY STRESS TOOLBOX

Most of us have a few coping skills to help alleviate holiday stress, but do you know when and how to use them?
3 TYPES OF COPING TOOLS FOR YOUR HOLIDAY STRESS

PROBLEM-FOCUSED
These skills involve finding ways to reduce or eliminate the stressor entirely. For example, to avoid the awful traffic and crowded shopping malls, you decide to shop online. Another example is planning the holidays on paper with a calendar so you’re not left wondering about and wandering in search of holiday events you might enjoy. Or you may consider eliminating all but the most important people on your gift list this year, or spending only a certain amount for each gift. Problem-focused skills can range from the subtle, such as a distraction from a stressful event (take a walk for a break from a stressful family get-together), to the extreme: its complete elimination (choose not to attend). Think of these skills as the difference between a tack hammer and a sledgehammer. Sometimes one works better than the other.

APPRaisal-FOCUSED
These skills, like a “file,” help you change the way you think about a stressful event by smoothing and reshaping its edges. They help you challenge assumptions and lead you to see problems, issues, or experiences in a different light. This could mean looking on the bright side, seeing the humor in a situation, or deciding it is okay not to have two types of cranberry sauce this year! Making a pros-versus-cons list to weigh the importance of an activity versus the effects of avoiding it entirely is an example of the appraisal approach to stress management. You may realize that suffering your brother-in-law’s annoying presence is far outweighed by seeing your cousins and enjoying your mom’s cornbread dressing, which suddenly makes tolerating him a little easier.

EMOTION-FOCUSED
These skills, like a “painter’s tarp,” protect you and help manage how you feel about the stress. This is where self-care comes in. Be sure that you get enough sleep, exercise, healthy nutrition, and spiritual support during the holiday season. Is the holiday season a difficult time because it feels lonely, because loved ones are missing, or because memories of years past are difficult to manage or painful to recall? With emotion-focused tools, you might consider ways to be around those who care about you, or you might take a trip to another geographic location or spend time volunteering to support others who need assistance or care during this time of year. Remember that some holiday stressors may require a variety of coping skills from any or all three of the “toolbox” categories indicated above, and it may take some trial and error to figure out which ones work best in a given situation.

And don’t forget, your employer does sponsor an employee assistance program, and it can lead you lots of ideas on how to manage stress.

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