

HOLIDAY

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WHAT'S
OPEN
TODAY?

8

Thrifty ideas for
last-minute
green gifting **3**

New Year's Eve
shopping survival
guide **10**

Try your hand
at a full page
of puzzles **19**

holiday zen

Where do you fall on the stress spectrum? **6-7**

Holiday Edition

Stress test

The secret to keeping cool over the holidays? Know thyself

By **Michael Hines**
REDEYE

Krystal Morris' holiday agony begins at Thanksgiving dinner.

"You have to deal with any criticism your family might give you," the Lawndale resident recently told RedEye. "'Oh, you gained a few pounds,' or, 'Your hair isn't so cute.'"

And Christmas is no slice of pumpkin pie for Morris, either.

This is billed as the season of joy, yet Morris hardly is alone in dreading the holidays and their disproportionate number of family commitments, gift-giving expectations and professional social events—and then the abrupt end to it all on Jan. 2.

Indeed, holiday anxiety is unavoidable, stress experts told RedEye, but a little perspective can minimize its traditional starring role.

Start with stress itself.

"We get stressed out, and then we beat ourselves up for being stressed out," said Alison Miller, who has a PhD in clinical psychology and founder of Tiara, a Chicago-based women's life-coaching group program. "Have a sense of humor about it. 'Oh, there I go again!'"

Kathleen Bucci Bergeron, co-owner of six Asha SalonSpa locations in the Chicago area, recalls a regular client who one December scheduled a two-hour relaxation treatment that incorporated massage, a foot bath, a steam session and aromatherapy. By the time the session was over, the client was in tears.

"She had been holding on to so much stress," Bergeron said. "It was good therapy."

Relax, Miller advises, and remember that it's OK to look out for yourself, even in a season when you're expected to put others first.

"We see a lot of images of perfection in the media. We sort of expect that is what we should have," she said.

Miller suggests making plans to decompress in January.

"Part of what creates stress is the anticipation of the letdown," she said. "Plan a party, a getaway, time with friends, whatever would be meaningful to look forward to."

Easy does it

Worried about over-indulging at holiday fetes? Relax! "One of the fun things about the holidays is eating a little bit more than you might normally eat," Dr. Russell Robertson, chair of the Northwestern University Department of Family Medicine, told RedEye. "If you gained 2 or 3 pounds, that's OK. You'll lose those if you make some reasonable decisions afterward." Moderation is the key to a healthy holiday season, Robertson said. He suggests using the three A's—anticipation, awareness and action—as a guide.

Anticipation

"Any kind of planning that people can do [is helpful]," Robertson said. "The holidays can arrive like a tsunami."

If you know you're going to be attending a feast—say, Christmas dinner—make sure you eat three meals that day.

Awareness

Be in control. Think of your food consumption from previous years, and decide how you would like to modify your intake, Robertson said.

If alcohol is a concern, he suggests removing it from the house so that it can't even be a temptation.

Action

Even doctors understand it's difficult to maintain an exercise regimen during the holidays, but Robertson suggests creating a post-holidays action plan.

"Dec. 26, you revert back to some more reasonable activities," he said. "You don't have to continue those [indulgent] behaviors through the new year."

So what is it that gets us wound up tighter than a strand of Christmas lights this time of year? And, more important, how do we release the tension? RedEye identified five common holiday stress personality types, at right, and asked the experts to show us how to unwind.

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SYMPTOMS: You hate Hanukkah, you despise Christmas, you loathe the New Year's Eve parties—and you aren't too fond of Thanksgiving either.

TYPICAL STRESSERS: Everything! The aggressive merry agenda is everywhere.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY: Live and let live. There's nothing wrong with your healthy dislike of the season, but there's also nothing wrong with people who embrace it.

FOR RELIEF: "Let people be the way that they are in relationship to the holidays," said Alison Miller, who has a PhD in clin. While everyone else is wrapped up in what makes them happy, find something to do that makes you happy. Just don't isolate yourself, said Dr. Russell Robertson, chair of the Northwestern University Department of Family Medicine.

the
scrooge

SYMPTOMS: The holidays aren't complete unless you've spent quality time with every friend and family member within a 100-mile radius.

TYPICAL STRESSERS: Juggling schedules, managing family conflicts and shopping for gifts

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY: "We chose to make the holidays into what they are, this big event and drama in our lives," Miller said. We also can choose to make it peaceful.

FOR RELIEF: "Talk with your family about how can we make this work?" Miller said. "How can we be creative so I can see everyone I want to see that's quality time and doesn't leave me stressed out? People appreciate upfront communication." And most important: Don't turn the holidays into forum to air your family grievances.

the
family
firster

SYMPTOMS: You plan a New Year's Eve bash at your house and suddenly realize your calendar is crammed with so many social engagements that you haven't left time to prepare.

TYPICAL STRESSERS: Commuting to parties, meeting countless new people, staying up late, spending time with colleagues you'd rather avoid and dealing with peer pressure to attend every single event

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY: In the spirit of the brotherhood of man, you accept every party invitation rather than risk disappointing your friends and colleagues.

FOR RELIEF: In some cases, you might be able to send a co-worker as your representative to a business event, said Lou Barajas, author of "Overworked, Overwhelmed and Underpaid: Simple Steps to Go From Stress to Success." If your mom's oldest friend is hosting a cocktail party, then let her know you'll be there but you'll have to duck out early, Miller suggested. The point is to set boundaries and schedule time for yourself.

the
socialite

SYMPTOMS: You would rather open an e-mail than a thoughtful gift from your nephew.
TYPICAL STRESSERS: Pesky family, closed offices and distracted colleagues
WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY: Get a grip! "The people who do that will rationalize the reasons why they need to continue looking at their e-mail. They've lost perspective about what life is about. Life is about relationships, not about e-mails," said Barajas, who rarely carries a cell phone. "I've never seen a U-Haul behind a hearse. You're not going to take anything with you."
FOR RELIEF: Let the holidays be a time to celebrate all that you've accomplished in the past year, Miller said. "What is the experience like for the people around you to have you looking at your BlackBerry between the turkey and the dessert course?" she said. "It's OK to take a break, and we all need that break."

the crackberry addict

the harried traveler

SYMPTOMS: You log more December miles in the air than Santa Claus, and you stay at each destination only slightly longer than the jolly old fat man.
TYPICAL STRESSERS: Travel delays, jet lag, lost luggage and a toddler from hell in the seat next to you who doesn't stop screaming until the plane touches down
WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY: The airport isn't your office. Holiday serenity can't be achieved until you accept your lack of control over the travel environment.
FOR RELIEF: "You do have control over how you respond to whatever is around you," Miller said. Choose to find a way to be peaceful even in stressful situations, she said. Barajas suggests toting along a family photo, creating a playlist of soothing songs on your iPod or catching up on thank-you letters. "When you're in the state of gratitude, there tends to be less stress," he said.

Ask the experts

Is holiday stress unavoidable? For the answer, let's turn to RedEye's panel of experts: Louis Barajas, author of "Overworked, Overwhelmed and Underpaid: Simple Steps to Go From Stress to Success;" Dr. Tamarah Duperval, a family physician and medical director of Mile Square Health Center; and Allison Miller, clinical psychology PhD and founder of Tiara, a Chicago-based life coaching program for women.



1 The holidays are the most stressful time of the year. Fact or fiction?

BARAJAS: Fact. There is too much time (and money) spent on thinking about finding the perfect gift for family and friends. We should spend the time and money on getting together more often throughout the year and making relationships a priority.

DUPERVAL: Fact. For many, the stress of seeing family members that they haven't seen all year and setting incredible expectations to find the "perfect" gift, can be too much to handle. Give yourself a break and remember that it is about giving thanks and happy feelings.

MILLER: Fiction. Any time of year can be the most stressful depending on what is happening in our lives and how we respond to it. The stress during the holidays comes primarily from having expectations that are too high for what the holidays are supposed to look like or be like.

2 What is your go-to spot to unwind in Chicago?

BARAJAS: Bandera Restaurant, to have some of their incredible corn bread with a martini.

DUPERVAL: By the lakefront. Whether going for a quick jog or just sitting on the rocks gazing at the water or the skyline, I always feel like I'm getting away.

MILLER: The lakefront. Year round, it has a pull and sense of calm regardless of the season. Even in the dead of winter, the lakefront can bring peace and serenity by just watching the water and the waves.

3 What is the most stressful part of the holiday season?

BARAJAS: Taking down the Christmas lights.

DUPERVAL: Probably shopping for gifts.

MILLER: For most people, the schedule and demands of living up to high expectations of having the holidays be what they think they "should" be are the most stressful.

4 The holidays would be better if ...

BARAJAS: ... we could eat all the Christmas treats and not gain a pound.

DUPERVAL: ... the focus wasn't about stuff, but about appreciating one another, being thankful for getting to the end of another year, and looking forward to the hope of a new year.

MILLER: ... we said "no" more often. My family hasn't sent out holiday cards over the past few years, and all our friends and family still love us and talk to us! Create what you want!

5 The holidays are to stress as...

BARAJAS: ... George W. Bush is to the poor economy.

DUPERVAL: ... the Cubs are to disappointment.

MILLER: ... the Olympics is to sports.