

## Relax to cope with stress over the holidays

Written by MEG SIBAL, M.D.

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FOR most individuals, the holiday season serves a hefty helping of stress right along with the turkey and eggnog which can negatively affect one's health, but finding ways to relax can help one cope with the increased demands and high expectations associated with the season and reduce an individual's risk for stress-related problems, such as depression, high blood pressure, muscle tension, poor sleep or headaches, according to the November 2010 issue of the Massachusetts General Hospital's *Mind, Mood & Memory*.

According to the American Psychological Association, as many as three-fourths of Americans experience moderate to high levels of stress during the holidays. Albert Yeung, M.D., ScD, Director of Primary Care Studies at the Depression Clinical and Research Program at MGH, says, "During the holidays, a buildup of stress can negatively affect your health, so it's important to take some time to unwind and release tension when holiday obligations make you feel obligated and anxious."

The health letter offers 10 simple and effective ways you can enjoy to help you conquer stress:

- Eat dark chocolate — This may be one effective and delicious way to reduce holiday stress. Researchers who measured the stress biochemicals of 30 volunteer participants with symptoms of serious stress, who were previously given 1.4 ounces of dark chocolate every day for two weeks, found significant reductions in levels of the stress hormones and adrenaline, as well as decreases in markers of pathogenic bacteria associated with high anxiety levels, according to a report in the Dec. 4, 2009 issue of the *Journal of Proteome Research*.

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- **Disconnect from your surroundings** — Turn off the TV, radio, phone and laptop then, find a quiet place where you can be alone with silence and sit quietly, focusing on deep, slow breathing for 20 minutes or so, says the letter.
- **Uncoil tense muscles** — Sit or lie comfortably and focus on alternately tightening and releasing muscles from head to toe to relieve tension in both mind and body. Beginning with your toes, clench your muscles and hold for a count of 10, focusing on feelings of tightness, then relax your muscles completely and notice the tension drain away. Continue on with your feet, calves, thighs, buttocks, and so on, up to and including your arms, shoulders, neck and facial muscles. When you're finished, feel blissfully relaxed, lie or sit quietly for a few minutes to enjoy the sensation of utter ease, adds the letter.
- **Distract yourself** — Think about something besides your to-do list and find an activity that wholly absorbs you...such as a puzzle, hobby, listening to music or watching a movie, spending at least a half hour enjoying it. A mini-vacation from holiday pressures will also help revitalize you and restore your energy.
- **Pamper yourself** — Activities that make you feel self-indulgent...such as taking a hot bath, getting a massage or facial, or going for a leisurely walk...are great ways to banish tension. Also, using lotions, fragrant candles or perfumed body oils can relax you with soothing scents.
- **Work out with yoga** — When done slowly and gently with deep breathing, many basic yoga moves are very relaxing...such as the chest opener where you stretch your ribcage and expand your chest by rolling up a towel or blanket and lying face up with the roll placed under your middle back and then, closing your eyes and breathing deeply, feeling the tension gradually leave your body.
- **Use acupressure** — A sort of self-massage, acupressure can help relieve tension and is especially effective when combined with deep, slow breathing and thoughts of a relaxing scene. One technique which involves interlacing your fingers behind your head with thumbs down, and pressing gently for a minute at the base of the skull on the right and left sides of the spine where bone and muscle meet while imagining a tranquil scene, helps clear your mind and restore

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focus.

- Re-experience past pleasures with photos — Spend some time looking over your family photo albums, concentrating on individuals and events that trigger pleasant memories, such as pictures of past vacations, beloved relatives and good friends which can help you relax.
- Pet a pet — Research suggests that cuddling with a pet cat or dog, or gazing at fish in an aquarium, can relieve tension and lower blood pressure, says the letter.
- Heat therapy — For a relaxing heat treatment, plug in a heating pad or make your own microwaveable heating pad...by filling a thick, athletic-type sock with rice or flaxseed, leaving a little space so grains can move around and tying it off with a string. Then, when you need a relaxing break, heat the sock for 1 minute or so in your microwave until it's agreeably warm, then sit or lie at ease while you apply the heated sock to your shoulders, neck or any other area where tension accumulates, concludes the health letter.