

T'is the season for being stressed

One simple definition of the complex subject of stress is emotional reactivity. According to authors Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves in *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, "Emotional hijackings are those moments when our emotions control our behavior and we react without thinking."

So, stress is largely a mental phenomenon. We may not control what is happening around us. We do have a choice about how we are going to respond to situations that make us feel anxious, fearful, worrisome and upset.

It seems like the holiday season can be exceptionally stressful for many people. While it should be a time to enjoy friends, family, and a Hawkeye Orange Bowl victory, many people are overwhelmed with planning and attending multiple events, financial concerns, interacting with relatives they see infrequently (by choice or by circumstance) and worrying about the extra pounds that often come with the festivities.

I'm human and I get stressed over the hoopla of the season like most people. I am, however, working diligently to improve my emotional intelligence and develop positive habits to reduce my anxiety. I hope some of these practices may be helpful to you in making the holidays brighter.



**GALE
MOTE**

Tree Full of Owls

First, stress can be reduced with physical activity. Make it a point each week to nurture a positive health habit. Find an activity that you enjoy and get into a routine for making it happen. Perhaps it is walking the dog, attending a yoga class, jogging on the treadmill while watching your favorite action movie or mall walking with a friend. The mind doesn't groove if the body doesn't move!

Next, set limits and manage expectations. What weekends or weeknights are off limits for activities and events? My husband and I have a tradition of spending Christmas Eve together, just the two of us (OK... with the cat!) We enjoy the quiet time together and always make my Grandma's oyster stew served in her antique bowls. Holding onto a tradition that you treasure brings stability and sanity into a crazy season.

When we have friends over, I set limits

as to how much cleaning and preparation I'm willing to do. This is our home, this is how we live – you are welcome to accept it as it is or not. It's not my worry.

When we have dinner with my family, I set reasonable expectations to enjoy the time together, be less bothered by small annoyances and make it a point to behave and communicate in a way that creates positive memories. My organizational coach, Maggie Jackson, has helped me to learn to say "no" more frequently and to block off time on my calendar for the unexpected that somehow always happens. When you have breathing room in your day, it is easier to be more relaxed and in control.

Along with managing expectations, I work very hard to be in the moment when I'm interacting with colleagues, friends, and relatives. This is not a natural strength for me as I tend to be impulsive and speak before I think. (This is also known as putting your foot into your mouth.)

I work to practice this technique when I'm driving, riding on a plane, or shopping in a crowded store. How am I feeling right now? Why am I feeling this way? How are these feelings affecting my judgment and reasoning? How can I take advantage of this calm before the storm? Keeping the

big picture in view and reflecting on my emotions helps me to engage the more rational part of my brain to make better choices.

For example, imagine standing in a long line waiting to check out at a busy department store when another person walks up and places her items on the counter. I can feel myself getting angry "What is she thinking? Does she think her time is more valuable than anyone else here?" I see other people in line beginning to roll their eyes and gesture unkindly at this person. Now, I breathe deeply and engage the thinking part of my brain – maybe she was here earlier and went back to get a different item? Maybe she is shopping for the person who is standing in the front of line? I try not to rush to judgment and that fact alone begins to calm my thoughts and heart rate. Even if she is jumping into the line, perhaps I can take solace in the fact that I'm being more polite and doing what is right. Regardless, I pick my battles. Is this one act worth getting stressed over, raising my blood pressure and giving me a headache? No chance.

Spending time each week nurturing one of my strengths makes me feel strong and

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fulfilled. When we develop our natural talents into real strengths, our confidence increases and we are able to contribute at a level of excellence.

Positivity is one of my natural talents (Gallup's *Strengthfinder 2.0*). I read self-management books that help me to see the bright side of situations and find ways to make other people feel good about who they are and what they can do. I spend time reflecting on the many blessings I have in my life, focusing on what I have, not what I don't have. I refuse to let people with crappy attitudes and bad moods negatively affect my perspective.

I look for reasons to make ideas work, not for reasons they won't. Be quick with praise and slow with criticism. Always remember that a kind word never goes unheard and too often goes unsaid. Find your inner strength and develop it into a compelling force in your life.

Stress is an emotional state of mind — take control and bring the real joy of the season to your life and others. Best wishes for a lovely holiday and a healthy, happy new year.

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