

GO A.P.E. (Over Holiday Stress)

By Joanne Flom, L.C.S.W.

Do you tend to stress out over the Holidays? Try handling this holiday season from a new perspective: GO A.P.E. - Anticipate, Plan and Enjoy. Easier said than done? Maybe; but diverting the negative impact stress can have on us is paramount to our well-being and more doable than you may think.

Anticipate Learn what triggers your stress levels by identifying if there is a certain time of the year that is most stressful to you, due to work constraints, family commitments or the holiday season.

Acknowledge that these are natural times of stress for you and don't try to deny or avoid it but rather, embrace it.

Once you've identified when stress typically hits you explore what specifically gets you stressed-out during those times. For instance, you may identify that the holidays are a stressful time for you, but what exactly makes it stressful for you? Is it the pressure of getting together with family, people taking off for long periods of time at work, finding meaningful gifts, etc.? Identifying the 'when' and the 'what' allows you to have a better sense of the stressful source and ultimately opens the door to finding successful ways to cope with and manage stressful triggers.

Plan Map out a way to cope with stress so that you are not left immobilized. Often times when feelings of stress develop we feel like we have no control over things, like our time or emotions. Developing a plan to help get through those stressful times will allow you to feel more in control.

Stress is usually accompanied with time constraints, which routinely means that the first thing to go is self care. Our gut reaction to handling stress seems to think not doing things for ourselves during stressful periods is the remedy. However, just the opposite is true - making time for yourself in the heat of the battle, so to speak, is what alleviates stress and helps you become centered and relaxed again. Whether it be a massage, a walk or just "vegging" out in front of the TV, make sure that your plan satisfies your needs which will help decrease your stress levels.

The plans we make to cope with stress are different for everyone - some people use healthy objectives, like exercise and meditation, and some people use not so healthy things like excessive drinking

and/or comfort eating. One of the most common stress reactions is food indulgence; chocolate being the food of choice for many of us. And, ironically, the #1 mistake people make when soothing with food is submitting to self condemnation as a result - which only adds to their stress level!

There are also times when we can't anticipate stress which makes it even more important to have a plan in place to help us gain control over the stress instead of the stress taking a hold over us. If for example, comfort food is your de-stressing tool of choice, then allow that to be your plan without the self judgment. Beating yourself up for doing something that was suppose to provide you some comfort defeats the purpose of attempting to de-stress, and only thrusts more anxiety and tension upon yourself. To ward off self judgment, keep in mind the following:

Recognize that you are stressed and that this is one of the ways you plan to de-stress - period.

Be less rigid about self-imposed "no-no's" during times of stress and allow yourself to choose one item or thing you look forward to doing.

Enjoy whatever it is that is helping to de-escalate your stress level. Chances are you've earned this reward!

Understand and believe that you will balance yourself out when things become less stressful for you.

Enjoy This may seem challenging but try to find something about the stressor that you enjoy. Many times what stresses us out is what gives us pleasure as well. If your stress is work related remind yourself why you are doing this job (financial gain, professional growth, intellectual challenge, etc). If it's a particular family member that causes you stress, try to think of a time when they have supported you or something that is endearing about them. And when it's the holidays that make you anxious, try to regain sight on what you are celebrating and why.

Reframe stress and attach a different meaning to it by taking a brief step back from the moment. In the simplest of terms, "let it go" - release anger, frustration, and resentment. When we reframe a negative event and give it a different meaning, it enables us to look at things from a different perspective. A new way of thinking about a situation allows us to have a new feeling

about the situation which can help us get out of stress mode. When you change your thoughts about something, you change your mind, and suddenly the situation or trigger doesn't seem to be as stressful as it once was.

There is a wealth of healthy ways to alleviate stress, from exercise, meditation and better nutrition, to asking for support from friends and family, or getting enough sleep and rest. Look toward the best things you

can do to decrease your stress levels whenever possible. In short, pick a positive potion and dump the negative emotion. Avoid going bananas and GO A.P.E. instead!

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