The Power and Pitfalls of the Holidays

As we all leave our “work-life” to spend time on our “home-life,” many of us experience the associated stress and anxiety of an altered schedule and special demands. While the holidays can be a time of joy, peace and togetherness, the additional chores and stressors—parties, shopping, travel, baking, cleaning and family commitments—can take a toll, and turn your “holiday” into work.

Prepare yourself—utilize the following three means to control stress:

- Improve your Mood
- Navigate Family Dynamics/Relationships
- Practice Gratitude…research has shown that one of the best tools to insulate yourself from stress is to live a life of gratitude. How serendipitous that the whole point of Thanksgiving is also key to alleviating the associated holiday stress.

**Improve Your Mood:**

**Get out!** Sunlight stimulates the production of serotonin and helps to relieve seasonal affective disorder (SAD). *Double your benefit by taking a brisk 30 minute walk in the sun, making sure to expose your skin and eyes.*

**Smell it!** Lemon, grapefruit and orange fragrances boost feelings of wellbeing and alleviate stress by upping levels of norepinephrine, a hormone that affects mood. *Splurge for that holiday citrus dish soap!*

**Squeeze it!** The fleshy place between your index finger and thumb is the hoku spot in traditional Chinese medicine. Apply firm pressure there for 30 seconds to reduce stress and tension in your upper body. *Double your benefit by taking 3 deep 10 second breaths.*

**Crack up!—** Laughing produces a hormonal happiness “high.” It might be time to watch “Planes, Trains and Automobiles,” “Elf,” or the perennial favorite about mismatched families, “The Birdcage.” Check out this family-friendly comedian with some great travel/airline humor [Brian Regan](http://www.brianregan.com/)

**Feel the Burn!** Spicy foods trigger the release of endorphins that promote feelings of euphoria and well-being. *Maybe some spicy Indian, Mexican or Thai food for a holiday change?*

**Navigate Your Family:**

**Let go of Perfection.** Enough said.

**Let go of Traditions You Don’t Like.** It’s ok to abandon a custom you don’t like. If you like the idea of tradition, think of a new one to begin.

**Practice Acceptance.** Here’s the good thing about family -- they are highly predictable. Personality traits and relationships you find enjoyable will still be there….as well as some you may find bothersome. Embrace/accept a varied cast of characters.

**Identify Strategies.** Even though spending time with extended family can be enjoyable, it’s not the status quo and you may need a break. Take a walk and text a friend. Comparing notes on stressful family behavior can release steam, help identify strategies you had not thought of, and enhance your feelings of support.

**Find Common Ground.** Find activities that everyone can participate in. Different ages, activity levels and areas of interest are often difficult to blend. Be sure to plan variety and don’t forget to allow for down time and personal time.
Practice Gratitude:
The purpose of Thanksgiving itself is gratitude. Gratitude is the ability to maintain a world view that appreciates the positive. Being thankful is strongly linked with both mental and physical health and can help relieve stress, depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. Studies show that gratitude can be deliberately cultivated and can increase levels of well-being and happiness among those who cultivate it and those who receive it. UC Davis’ own Dr. Robert Emmons is a leader in gratitude research with a lab here on campus and a list of books (many his own) that would make a great holiday host/hostess gift.

- Keep a gratitude journal. There’s an app for that! Learn to journal at UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center’s website—they have a digital, interactive, and sharable gratitude journal. Visit the GGSC webpage for science-based information on gratitude, as well as other core themes for a meaningful life.

- Take a gratitude quiz to establish your level of gratitude.

- Use a Gratitude Cheat Sheet (60 things to be grateful for).

- Be sincere in your gratitude to others—look the Starbucks human being in the eye and use their name.

Despite your best efforts, if you are still feeling stressed after the Thanksgiving “holiday,” and want to do better for the next bout of vacation days, we can help. Attend our WorkLife and Wellness Brown Bag “Self-Reflexology for Stress Reduction and Wellness” on Thursday, December 3 at the Student Community Center MPR (by the Silo). 12:00-1:00. Presented by Jennifer Gouine.