

**Luis A. Vazquez, Regents Professor
Associate Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies
The Graduate School**

Holiday Stress and the Pandemic: Take Control of Your Holiday

This year, the holidays are becoming more and more challenging not just because the pandemic has exacerbated everything we are used to dealing with at a normal level, but has also made us reflect more on our lives. For some of us, we have started sleeping more than usual or very little as we stare at the ceiling. For few of us bathing has become more sporadic and diminishing each week. For many of us, we have noticed skin irritations on our face and body, along with a larger number of recurring headaches. There are a few of us who are having facial twitches that are sending out Morse codes to our friends and family. Yet, others have acquired some chest pains, pains in the lower back or in our legs.

Emotionally, some of us have silently cried over being overwhelmed over our experiences. Anger seems to be displayed more often with others and loved ones. For many, feelings of helplessness have set in as part of our daily lives. For others, we have become more introspective and become very quiet observers as we criticize others in our minds with these emotions. Behaviorally, some of us are trying to take control. This may take the place of just taking over and minimizing others around us. Some of us have become very outwardly critical and short with others. For some of us, anything that anyone says to us becomes a shout for battle. Yet for others making things financially secure and caring for others has become the ultimate challenge. If you are experiencing any of the things, I just mentioned then you are experiencing the pandemic holiday stress, not just the normal holiday stresses.

The key is to try to be proactive and try to prevent as much stress as you can during this holiday season. Acknowledge your feelings with someone you trust. Just the other day, I asked someone how they were doing. I noticed a little twitch by their left eye. The person looked up at me and just started crying. I listened for almost an hour and must admit, it also brought tears to my eyes. After that hour, we shared that just having someone listen and acknowledge the sadness and stress made us feel so much better in a world of chaos. The experiences of loss, going without and putting on a strong face all the time can be exhausting!

Feelings of loneliness can also trigger many feelings of isolation and sadness. Remember, we are to socially (physically) distance from each other. This does mean that we cannot communicate with each other through texting, facetimeing, ZOOMING, TEAMING, emailing, phone calling, and be with those that are in our "bubble" of safety to share with in times of stress. Let's take advantage of the different ways of communicating and sharing our stories. I have heard some pretty good ones lately and some have even been pretty funny.

Sometimes in helping ourselves, we end up helping others and vice versa, what a thought. Also, let's try to be realistic. My holidays were never perfect, were yours? Pick what the most important realistic things you loved for the holidays to do. This year, it may not be as many activities or things, but it may be the things that mean the most to you that are within reach. Maybe you might send old pictures back

and forth or videos you made to share during your holiday zoo. Be creative and find different ways to connect as you show how much you care for each other. The other night I laughed as I looked at pictures of when I had “big” hair and wore bell bottoms. I was so cool back then, LOL!

Most importantly, be financially conscious, be aware of what you can and cannot spend this holiday. Some will max out their credit cards trying to make so many others happy with gifts, until they get their bills at the end of the holidays, driving them to depression. This year, maybe it's good to have a gift exchange, or do something that is homemade or maybe send an “I Really Care:” video expressing what you mean to me and how important you are in my life. Maybe a future “Collect-from-me-later card” for a happy time together. I remember one Christmas holiday. It was a really rough one and we had very little spend. We went to a consignment shop and got quite a few toys and spent very little money buying them. When we got them home, we washed them, de-sanitized them and wrapped them ever so carefully. The next day, the kids opened the gifts and were so excited to get them. We played all day together.

A really tough thing to do is to know when to say no and keeping a healthy lifestyle. If you are like many of us, the first thing to go is exercise and eating healthy. For some of us, not saying no takes away from taking care of ourselves and our immediate loved ones. It's quite the balance to master and takes a lot of courage. We need to take care of ourselves if we are to be of any use for others. Children often learn from our behaviors and others have learned what to expect, especially if we never say no, to always call us.

Lately, I have been listening to soft music and at times turn on some of the oldies and bust a move. It lets me know that I am still alive and still got it, LOL! I have also found myself watching the moon rise at night, looking at the stars and just enjoying the evening. Who knows? You may also enjoy these things or even taking a walk outside the “AWE Walks” I mentioned the last time we wrote for the newsletter can all be very helpful.

If after reading this, you just can't seem to want to try or do anything or feel paralyzed, then I strongly encourage you to seek professional help. This is even more important especially if you have had body aches and pains, feeling sad and have been angry for long periods of time and find yourself constantly silently crying.

Learn from your experiences, **CONTROL YOUR HOLIDAY, DON'T LET IT CONTROL YOU.**

COVID-19 AND YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/mental-health-covid-19/art-204827>

CORONAVIRUS GRIEF: COPOING WITH THE LOSS OF ROUTINE DURING THE PANDEMIC

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/coping-with-coronavirus-grief/art-20486392>

COVID-19 AND HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS: TIPS FOR GATHERING SAFELY

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/covid-19-holiday-safety-tips/art-20503363>

CREATE A SOCIAL BUBBLE, STAY SAFE OVER THE HOLIDAYS

<https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/create-a-social-bubble-stay-safe-over-the-holidays/>