

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Stressed During the Holidays? There's an Exercise for That.

Source: Danielle Friedman, *New York Times*, December 2, 2022

The holidays may be known for their go-go-go stressful energy, but we also tend to spend a lot of time in December being sedentary. Historically, people are least physically active during the winter, thanks to falling temperatures, limited hours of sunlight, calendars jam-packed with travel and social commitments and, of course, the tug of the couch after too much eggnog.

Americans are five times more likely to say their stress level increases rather than decreases during the holidays. And while these higher stress levels aren't only caused by a lack of physical activity, the lethargy certainly doesn't help, said Dr. Rebecca Brendel, president of the American Psychiatric Association and an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School.

Exercise can be a key way to combat the stress of the season. And it can take whatever shape and form you prefer.

If you already have an established fitness routine, keep it up. Research shows that, over time, regular exercise can help to prevent stress in the first place by improving our body's ability to neutralize stress-causing hormones and by increasing dopamine receptors in the brain, allowing us to feel more joy.

And if you haven't been consistently working out? You can turn to exercise "as needed," in the same way you might take an Advil for a headache, said Sepideh Saremi, a licensed clinical social worker and the founder of Run Walk Talk, a Los Angeles-based therapy program in which she treats her clients while engaging in physical activity. Research suggests that a single session of intense exercise (whatever that means for you) can boost your mood for up to 24 hours.

While just about any movement can offset holiday overwhelm, we asked mental health experts who focus on the mind-body connection for their best advice for this particular time of year.

Do the opposite of what's keeping you down.

The holidays can feel constricting, both physically and psychologically. Travel requires squeezing yourself into small spaces in airplanes or trains and crowded parties intrude on your personal space. A relative's backhanded compliments about your life choices can make you feel emotionally small, too.

When you're feeling squeezed, do a workout (or single exercise) that encourages the body to take up space, said Erica Hornthal, a dance therapist in Chicago.

Ms. Hornthal suggested carving out time for full body, reach-for-the-sky style stretching sessions. Even two to three minutes of this can help to offset feeling cramped. She also recommended shaking off the feeling of constriction. "Shake your hands, shake your head — kind of like an animal after it gets wet," she said. "You can make a game out of it if you have kids."

If you're feeling claustrophobic at your in-laws' house, find an open space and try an eight and a half-minute "joy workout" that leads you through six body-expanding moves designed to boost happiness, including reaching, swaying, bouncing and jumping.

You can use this counterbalancing strategy to ease the relentless pace of the holidays, too. If you feel like you're constantly racing from one commitment to the next, seek out a workout that slows the body down.

Yoga, with its focus on breathing and mindful movement, can be an especially effective tool for alleviating this feeling of nonstop doing. Making time for a 15-minute session in the morning or evening can help the mind and body reset to a more comfortable pace.

Jog or walk with friends — or foes.

When you feel your family stress meter rising, make time to step out and take an "empathy run" or walk — a concept coined by William Pullen, a therapist in London.

To do it, Mr. Pullen said, enlist a friend or loved one to accompany you for a jaunt outside — even for just 20 minutes. While moving together, take turns expressing whatever is stressing you out and listening without judgment.

Alternatively, Ms. Saremi said you could suggest going for a jog or walk with a family member who is *causing* you stress. “It can help you both be more in the present moment, so you’re not continually playing up old dynamics.” Another advantage to talking while moving? You don’t have to look at each other. “Without the pressure to make eye contact,” we often feel freer to open up, she said. “It makes it easier for people to connect.”

Take a group dance class.

If you want to feel more happiness and connection with the people around you, sign up for a dance fitness class.

Research has shown that, when humans move in tandem, we are primed to feel as if the boundaries between us are dissolving, creating a sense of shared humanity, said Emiliya Zhivotovskaya, founder of The Flourishing Center, which coaches individuals and organizations in positive psychology.

Group dance classes, like Zumba or the classic Jazzercise, are an excellent way to experience this sense of community, said Ms. Zhivotovskaya, who is also an instructor with the mind-body dance fitness program *intenSati*. “When we move in unison, a part of brain gets activated that tells us, ‘oh, we’re not alone.’”

Plus, when you’re trying to follow along with a group, it’s hard to be in your head, she said, which can quiet any stress-inducing “mind chatter.”

Go on a “microadventure.”

Scientists have found that people who experience awe report lower levels of daily stress. Try planning a creative “microadventure” to calm your mind: Take a familiar bike ride in the dark to see your surroundings with fresh eyes, or do a day hike on a local mountain, pausing along the way to revel in the views.

Or you can simply step outside. A growing body of research suggests that spending time in nature, even just in a city park, can have a soothing effect on our minds and bodies, including lowering stress hormones and reducing physical measures of stress such as blood pressure.

“Benefits can range from increased feelings of happiness and emotional well-being to positive social interaction to decreased stress and anxiety,” said Gregory Bratman, director of the Environment and Well-Being Lab at the University of Washington.

Try a workout you’ve never done before.

Maybe you’re traveling and away from your regular gym or equipment — or you’re home, but your favorite studio is closed for the holidays. Turn the obstacle into a challenge to try something different.

“Our brain is a novelty-seeking machine,” said Ms. Zhivotovskaya. When we learn something new, we activate our body’s reward system, releasing dopamine and lifting our mood. This explains why people turn to social media for a quick boost of newness, she said — but trying a fitness workout or class is healthier.

Maybe you’re back at your childhood home and found an old jump rope in the garage — challenge yourself to jump for 60 seconds. Or play a game of pickup basketball with your nieces and nephews. Or dust off those in-line skates. (For more inspiration, check out our *Why Not Try* workout guides.)

Plus, research suggests doing a variety of workouts can contribute to your overall fitness, in part by warding off boredom and encouraging you to stay active. Whatever exercise you choose, taking time to move your body this season can fill you with a healthy dose of cheer.

Possible Response Questions

- Do the holidays stress you out? Explain. If so, how do you counter your stress?
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.