



‘Tis the season to be merry

Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!

While the shops are full of tinsel and jolly music, the end of the year is not the merriest season for all of us. This is because across the world, wherever the last days of the year are a time of festivities and family get-togethers, it’s also a season in which the experience of stress, fatigue, irritability, anxiety and even depression is relatively common.

With good reason: very often those family events are not so cheerful, because pressures, expectations, and simmering feuds rise to the surface when we’re all forced to spend a fair bit of time together. For those who are alone – whether because they’re far from home or recently divorced or have lost a loved person – it can be a time of terrible trial. For women who carry most of the load of arranging and cooking huge meals for large groups of people, it may be a time of exhaustion. And for many of us, in the grip of the commercialisation of the major festival, and societal expectations, it’s a time of diving deeper into debt as we spend, spend, spend. All of this can make your mood take a dark turn.

But there’s good news: you can take control of your mood this holiday season. “There’s a simple way to help yourself,” says Professor Witness Mudzi, president of the South African Society of Physiotherapy (SASP). “Exercise!”

A piece of research was published in October this year, “the largest and most extensive study of its kind,” (ScienceDaily 3 October 2017), which involved monitoring the exercise levels and depression and anxiety of close on 34,000 Norwegian adults over 11 years. “The results indicated that a significant number of cases of depression could be prevented if people engaged in just one hour of exercise every week,” says Professor Mudzi.

To prevent a holiday season meltdown:

- Keep exercising/start exercising

If you already exercise, accept that you may not hit your exercise targets perfectly – you may only manage a quick twenty-minute run, or have to skip a couple of your usual sessions at the gym. Just keep doing as much as you can. If you've allowed the idea of exercise to lapse, now is a good time to do a few little things to get your body back into the habit: take advantage of work downtime to walk the dog or play soccer with the children; get outside and hike or swim or cycle or surf for fun; aim to be physically active for 150 minutes during the week. "Two and a half hours of exercise is the amount of time that's generally accepted to make a difference to your health," says Professor Mudzi. "It will definitely help to keep your mood from dipping!"

- Eat, drink, and be merry
Don't put yourself under unreasonable expectations when it comes to big festive meals or other holiday occasions. If you plan on a little indulgence – one slice of cake, two glasses of wine, instead of aiming to stick to your rigid dietary standards – you are less likely to suffer a huge blow-out. Of course, it is important to drink responsibly; don't be a danger to yourself and others.
- Sleep tight
In holiday periods, people tend to break their usual sleep patterns, staying up late and catching up with long lie-ins. "Sleep is critical to our health – it affects the hormones," says Professor Mudzi. "Broken or late nights may trigger a cascade of hormonal events which may leave us feeling in poor shape, both physically and in terms of mood." Have fun, but try to get as many normal nights of sleep as you can.
- Forgive yourself
Be kind to yourself and accept any slip-ups when under stress. You are only human, after all. If you are nice to you, you'll probably be nicer to everyone else, and they'll be nicer to you in turn!

Journal Reference:

Samuel B. Harvey, Simon Øverland, Stephani L. Hatch, Simon Wessely, Arnstein Mykletun, Matthew Hotopf. Exercise and the Prevention of Depression: Results of the HUNT Cohort Study. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2017; appi.ajp.2017.1
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