

Give yourself healthier holiday habits

By Douglas Burns

Holidays can be a source of light and warmth, but change in routines and expectations can also cause stress, illness and accidents. These problems often are preventable with good self-care.

First, all of us can benefit from learning to manage the stress of too much togetherness or too little togetherness. Learning coping skills can help us the rest of the year as well.

When your hectic day drains you of energy, remember that even 15 minutes of quiet time can help you recharge.

Be mindful. Note what fills each of your senses in a moment. That can help you reconnect with your "holiday spirit."

Some of us will have a holiday that feels too quiet. We may be far from home, separated by a disagreement or missing someone we can't bring back. Meditating, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go, can help you be aware of feelings of loneliness, and ease the emotion.

Reach out and tell people they are important to you and ask for help if you need it. Sometimes a conversation is enough to save a life.

End-of-year holidays offer opportunities to learn to manage our physical health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the most common causes of death in Montana are heart disease, cancer, COVID-19, motor vehicle accidents, chronic lung disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, suicide and liver disease. Many of these fatal risks can be affected by the food we eat, how much we exercise, and habits such as smoking.

The holidays bring a lot of triggers for unhealthy behaviors, making it a great time to learn lifelong skills. For example, you can:

- Become aware of how you stress eat, or how you change how you eat based on who is around you. Enjoy your family's special holiday foods in moderation. Avoid too much salt, fat and alcohol.
- Take care of your heart. A type of abnormal heartbeat rhythm is actually called "holiday heart syndrome" It is caused by a combination of factors including stress and excessive alcohol consumption – two risks common during the holidays. Holiday heart requires prompt medical attention to treat and prevent further damage.
- Keep up regular exercise routines. Use personal fitness as time to be alone or to have other join for some shared fun time.
- Don't overdo exercise, especially strenuous activities such as snow shoveling. Older adults, people with heart disease or other health issues can avoid pushing their heart too hard by asking others to shovel snow.
- Develop a system, such as using a pill tray, or phone alerts, to avoid missing medications amid the distractions and travel of the holidays.
- Stay up-to-date on appointments for vaccines and health screenings and get new health issues addressed promptly.
- Practice safe driving habits: Avoid texting while driving. Don't drink and drive. Buckle your seat belt.

Take care of your health during the holidays and you will have routines to help yourself stay well all year long.

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