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## Coping with Holiday Stress at Work

Compared to the holiday-harried average employee, Santa Claus has it easy. Jolly ol' St. Nick might have to work around the clock to meet those holiday production demands, but at least he has a staff of well-trained professional elves to help him along, not to mention a pretty cushy schedule. Who wouldn't love to work just one day a year?

If only everyone had it so good. Most of us are familiar with the tension that the holidays can cause at home, but the workplace can be similarly frantic and filled with anxiety during the season. The added pressures of holiday-shortened deadlines, end-of-the-year business demands, and challenging patient situations can all take a steep toll on already frayed nerves.

Statistics Tell The Story

In a poll of 600 full-time employees, Accenture's Human Resource Services found that 66 percent of the respondents reported additional stress at work during the holidays. Also, readers of *Performance & Profits* were asked to rank their greatest sources of work-related holiday stress based on the following three categories: Trying to complete projects before the holidays; dealing with stressed out customers; balancing extra demands at home with work. Below is a graph representing reader rankings.
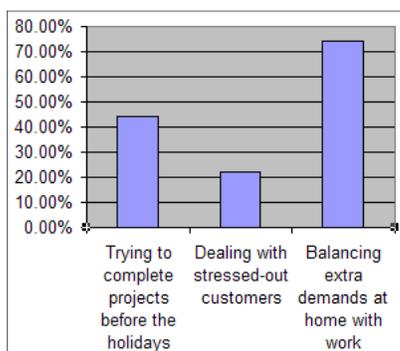
Effects of Holiday Stress

The extra emotional baggage many people carry with them throughout the season, which can range from mild stress to debilitating depression, can make work more difficult. According to experts, more people become depressed or anxious during the holidays than any other time of year. Feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities, disappointed by unrealistic expectations and worries about money are some of the chief symptoms of the holiday blues. Many people also eat less than healthy foods as part of the festivities, compounding their emotional malaise. With the season becoming longer—starting as early as October—fatigue also begins to set in earlier.

At the office, the doldrums manifest themselves in various forms, including a disengaged workforce. A study by staffing company, Accountemps, found that according to 44 percent of surveyed executives, productivity drops off the week before the holiday. Some of that drop off in productivity, of course, is caused by relaxed and carefree employees getting into the spirit of the season. A good portion of it, however, undoubtedly results from holiday burnout.

Beat The Holiday Blues

So how do we manage the holiday stress while still honoring our commitment to providing the best patient care and service experience possible? Start by proactively planning your day and becoming aware of your stress signs.

Plan Your Day in Advance—the holiday season is known for the unexpected. Unexpected visitors at home, unexpected projects at work, and unexpected illnesses at both home and work, just to name a few. While it may not be possible to predict the future, it is entirely within

your control to begin each day with a plan in mind. Balancing extra time at work and at home presents a big challenge for many people. Take 20-minutes at the start of each day to figure out what you need to get done and by what timeframe. Set priorities and realistic goals, both personally and professionally. Make sure that the tasks at the top of your daily to-do list are things that absolutely need to get done today—whether it's following up on a patient's test results or preparing your home for holiday visitors. Planning your day in advance is a great way to establish order during the hectic holiday season.

Notice Your Stress Signals—since, for many people, the holiday season is one of the most stressful times of year, it is important to be in tune with your stress signals. Are you quicker to anger than usual? Do you feel constantly on edge? If so, put into effect some useful stress reducers such as eating well, exercising, and spending some holiday time with friends and colleagues that you enjoy. It also helps to remember that if you're feeling the holiday stress, then it's likely that your patients will feel it too. Your ability to notice your stress signals and manage those signals while at work can go a long way in helping your patients feel less stressed when they come to visit your office or service area.

Enjoy the Season

Most importantly, remember that the holiday season is meant to be enjoyed! Keep in mind that there has never been a holiday season that has ever gone perfectly. Turkeys get burned, gifts are unavailable, and loved ones get sick—these things happen. Do not hold yourself to an unrealistic standard. Take it all in, relax, have fun, and remember that right around the corner is the start of a brand new year! ▶

Stress Tips Beyond the Holidays

Although the holiday season is especially hectic, it is safe to say that managing stress is a year-round challenge no matter who you are or where you happen to live. According to *Entrepreneur Magazine,* every year 30,000 Japanese people die from "karoshi"—they work themselves to death. No such epidemic exists in the U.S. yet, but the medical journal, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, recently reported that 24 percent of workers surveyed suffered fatigue for periods longer than two weeks. Job stress was high on the list of causes for this fatigue. In fact, the United Nations' International Labor Organization indicates that 75 percent of American workers consider their jobs stressful.

Unfortunately, work stress has significant health consequences that range from the relatively benign—more colds and flus—to the more serious, such as heart disease and metabolic syndrome. Because stress at work is so common, adopting more effective strategies to reduce stress at work has almost become a required skill for professional success. Below are some stress management techniques to consider.

Proper Training

Few things are better at alleviating work stress than knowing what to do and how to do it well. When employees do not know the best way to perform a task, anxiety and frustration results, causing stress and ultimately burnout. Whether it's becoming more proficient at scheduling appointments, consistently selecting the correct financial payor in ADT Encounter Registration, effectively communicating by applying C-I-CARE, or dealing with an irate patient that's not quite in the "holiday spirit," classroom training can provide employees with a safe environment to learn the needed skill and ability to succeed at work.

Be Clear on Requirements

One of the factors that contributes to job burnout is unclear job requirements and standards. If employees don't know exactly what is expected, or if the requirements keep changing with little notice or instruction, staff may become much more stressed than necessary. It is helpful to review expectations, standards, and strategies for meeting performance goals during staff huddles and meetings. Regular communication can help relieve stress for both the employee and manager.

Stay Organized

Planning ahead to stay organized can greatly decrease stress at work. With good time management skills you are in control of your time and your life, of your stress and energy levels. You make progress at work. You are able to maintain balance between your work, personal, and family lives. You have enough flexibility to respond to surprises or new opportunities.

Reduce Multitasking

Multitasking was once heralded as a fantastic way to maximize one's time and get more done in a day. Then people started realizing that when they were engaged in a conversation with a customer while performing precise data entry at the same time, their speed and accuracy (not to mention sanity) suffered. There is a certain kind of frazzled feeling that comes from splitting one's focus that doesn't work well for most people. Rather than multitasking, try a new strategy known as "chunking." For example, checking in a patient while *simultaneously* finishing up paperwork from the previous patient would be considered multitasking. Chunking, however, describes the process of switching between both tasks (rather than doing them simultaneously) to ensure better performance and better service.

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