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fitness

Lessen the stress: Striking a holiday balance

December's pressures easily can feel overwhelming. Three experts offer their advice on getting through in good shape.

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The Denver Post

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(Cindy Enright, The Denver Post)

The dream: The holidays are a time of joy, merriment and togetherness.

The reality: The month is fraught with stress about everything from money and time management to work and family pressures.

Those normal anxieties coupled with the bad economy mean it is going to take special skill to successfully navigate the holiday season this year.

So we called on some experts to share advice on how to stay fit and healthy in spite of the minefield that is December. David Kirsch, celebrity trainer, owner of Madison Square Club in New York and author of "The Ultimate New York Diet" and "The Ultimate New York Body Plan"; Carla Levy, executive editor of Self magazine; and Stephanie S. Smith, a licensed clinical psychologist with Front



Carla Levy, executive editor, Self magazine

Range Psychological Associates and public education coordinator for the Colorado Psychological Association, have plenty of tips on keeping stress levels in check.

Here is their advice:

1. You can't control what happens on Wall Street,

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but you can be in charge of your health and diet.

Continue to make exercise and eating well a priority. People tend to give up their fitness and diet routine between Thanksgiving and New Year's, which sets them up for a hard time in January, Kirsch says. "The problem is that when you have that attitude, getting back on a program is really difficult and becomes overwhelming.

"I find that cocktail parties are the downfall for many of my clients," Kirsch adds. "They feel pressured to go to the parties, then you add to it the bad food and lack of workouts, and there's a total disconnect between mind and body."

"It's easy to get overwhelmed and let your self-care slide," agrees Levy. "The important thing is to keep your expectations realistic. Maintain healthy habits, but don't try to take on something new now because if you fail or try to achieve too much, you'll be disappointed."

"Keep your routine as normal as you can," Smith adds. "If you usually work out after work, do it. If you eat dinner together on a certain night, try to keep doing that."



David Kirsch, celebrity trainer and author

2. Exercise even if you have only a few minutes a day .

"We all should have 10 minutes in the morning," says Kirsch. "There's nothing like that first look in the mirror straight out of bed to slap you back into reality. If you don't like what see, that's incentive."

He has developed 10-minute workouts that will be featured on [weightwatchers .com](http://weightwatchers.com) starting this week and are in his books (more at his website, [davidkirschwellness .com](http://davidkirschwellness.com)).

The idea is to just keep moving. "Whether you do power yoga, boot camp or take a dance class, jog outside or get on a bicycle, connecting your body to

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your brain and really understanding how it feels to feel healthy and alive is going to be what keeps you at the top of your game," Kirsch says.



Stephanie S. Smith, public education coordinator, Colorado Psychological Association

There are ways to increase the benefits you get from a short workout too. "Add intervals to your daily walk and you can double your calorie burn," says Levy, who tries to stick to a year-round schedule of 2-mile walks at least three times a week. "I'll add one-minute bursts of running. Then when I get back home I'll do lunges or push-ups to get more of a workout."

You can also expand your idea of exercise: Go ice skating with friends, or take a couple of extra laps around the mall on a shopping trip.

3. Reduce money worries by deciding on a budget and sticking to it. "Figure out your budget right now, and make a list," Levy says. "Don't wait till January and add up receipts after the fact. You don't want that financial hangover."

4. Talk with friends and family about finances — it's OK to cancel gift-giving among friends or change the way you approach gift-giving.

Tell your kids that it's not that Santa isn't coming but that there's going to be more quality than quantity this year, Levy says.

"The key is to have a solid plan," Smith says. "You need to sit down with your partner and children and say, 'Here's the deal: I'm doing only one holiday event, or we're giving gifts only to people under 15. Kids are very receptive and flexible, and it's never too early to start or too late to do things like focusing on family time, or volunteering together, or adopting a family.'"

5. Do things that make you feel better but don't cost anything .

Volunteering at a food bank, nursing home or rescue mission helps others and makes you feel better at the same time.

"We have a study that says that volunteering doesn't just make you feel good, it makes you healthy," Levy says (read about it on self.com). "Even people who volunteer only 40 hours a year report having fewer sick days and less stress. And you may acquire new skill sets in the process."

6. Make time for yourself to meditate, do yoga or just do things you enjoy .

"It's easy to get overwhelmed and let self-care slide," Levy says. "You need to invest time in

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yourself.

"As the mother of two toddlers," Smith says, "I don't have much time, but I love to watch 'House Hunters' in the evening. That's my de-stressing."

7. Drink up — but avoid consuming alcohol to excess .

Don't forget to drink water, Levy says. "You're spending more time indoors, in cars.

"And beware of the dehydrating effects of alcohol. To save calories, go for champagne or light beer," she says. "If you really love eggnog, have half a cup."

Have a protein shake to coat your stomach before going to a cocktail party, and make your first "drink" a glass of water or seltzer, Kirsch says.

8. Enjoy "party" foods, in moderation .

The key is to consume reasonable portions, Levy says. If you love pecan pie, eat some, but don't go overboard.

And arm yourself with information before a party. "You can have a real feast for 400 calories if you play it right," she says. "Shrimp cocktail is low-calorie, full of protein and feels luxurious to eat. Prosciutto melon balls look like fat bombs, but they're not bad."

9. Don't be afraid to say no.

"The fact is a lot of people probably won't miss you at the 12th neighborhood potluck or company party," Smith says. "You need to practice saying 'no.'"

That includes charitable giving, she adds. "I'm all

for giving, but we get inundated with requests. They will accept your money or time in April too."

10. Keep things in perspective.

It's so easy to get caught up in the trappings of the holidays that you forget what matters, Smith says.

Instead of fretting that you can't justify spending the money to buy a new dress or suit to wear to your spouse's fancy company party, be thankful they haven't canceled the party. Be thankful your spouse has a job. Wear the same outfit you wore last year and count your blessings.

11. Find non-material, or less-expensive, ways to celebrate. Throw an ugly-sweater party where people wear finds from the thrift shop and drink a little punch, Levy says. "Another idea is to have a Santa trash bag party — go to the dollar store and load up, then give out those gifts. Or have a cookie-baking weekend."

12. Seek help if you need it. What if none of these ideas is helping you appreciate the holidays? "If you're really feeling like you can't enjoy things you typically enjoy, it might be time" to get professional help, Smith says.

If you're not able to do your job because you're constantly worried or sad, a therapist can help, she says.

"It doesn't mean you'll be on the couch for the rest of your life," Smith says, "You might just need a session or two to get priorities in order."

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