

International Stress Awareness Day - November 7th, 2012

Beating Xmas stress - International Stress Awareness Day expert advice

October 22, 2012 (FPRC) -- Finding rest and respite from the pressures of work can be difficult. Even taking leave can be insufficient to unwind fully and regain drained energy. For Stress Awareness Day (7 November 2012), a psychotherapist offers advice on planning a Christmas break that sets 2013 off to a good start. Whether it is just a few days off work or a couple of weeks away, these are some well-researched hints on getting the most relaxation benefits from time out of the office.

Sherylin Thompson, integrative psychotherapist, says: 'The good news is that research shows that it is not just the length of the break that matters but what you do during it . So you need not shell out for an extended exotic holiday to reap the rewards of having a Christmas break. A few days off could do.' Sherylin sets out her CALMS model to equip you with inner strength and resilience to kick-start the New Year. It draws on a number of psychological theories with a winning formula to help you feel replenished, revitalised and refreshed even over the busy festive season.

Choice & Autonomy: This is about how much you personally feel you have freedom and choice. Even if you have lots of Christmas tasks on your plate, you are more likely to feel that you would choose to do the tasks if you believe you and your loved ones benefit. If what you do has personal meaning, you are less likely to see them as a chore, even if the tasks prevent you from putting your feet up. Look through your Christmas task list and decide which have the most meaning and match your own personal values. Start with these and decide whether you can delegate or hire in help for the others. Finding freedom in the to-do-list will bring a sense of autonomy, a core psychological need . On the flip side, research shows that both men and women experiencing low autonomy and control at home have higher levels of depression and in addition, men experience more anxiety . So find something that you choose to do in and amongst your responsibilities. It is important to focus on your needs too.

Let go: This is about making a conscious choice to 1) detach from work and 2) relax. Detach from work by deciding what you can leave in the office. This could be your mobile, e-mails as well as responsibilities by seeing if a colleague can pick up on essential work so that you do not need to. You can also detach from work by not using the same skills on your break as you use in your job. Over-using job skills could result in burn-out even if they are not in the context of work . If you work in IT, time away from technology would be more beneficial. If you work in a building trade, try to avoid the temptation to turn your work skills to your own home.

Relaxation is not about doing as little as possible. The essential ingredient is that the activity brings positive emotions. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions says that developing your ability to enjoy a good mood will broaden your mind and build your inner strength. Negative moods from work can narrow your thinking. In contrast, allowing yourself to feel good will give you a wider perspective and relief from the difficulty. Think about what activities bring you natural enjoyment – nature, socialising, crafts, sport – and allow yourself to appreciate them as much as possible.

Mastery: This is how competent, effective and capable you feel in your leisure time. Find opportunity to develop a special hobby you seldom have opportunity to. Feeling that you can competently

master a developing interest can help you feel a sense of choice and autonomy and bring positive emotions essential for relaxation. Mastery therefore links to the former elements of the CALMS model. It also leads to the final one, social activity, in that you could feel masterful in sharing your interest with others. See if you can put a natural personal ability you have to enhance others' Christmas experience. For example, offer your quality to be kind and generous, support a local choir with your voice, use your creative flair on the decorations, challenge a friend to a game of squash.

Social activity: This is being able to reconnect with friends and family. It is not always easy for families to get along at Christmas, so focus on the people who support you the most. Accept offers for help and take that as a sign of someone caring for you. It is also not worth prioritizing the to-do list if it means having a fall-out with a loved one. Prioritise the people, let go of the list. If you are more introverted, Christmas parties could feel like a strain. Manage your time by limiting those which you will attend and make an excuse to leave early. It is fine to save your energy for your nearest and dearest and for the social events that enhance your mood rather than drain you.

While Christmas time is a notorious time for seasonal stress, it is also traditionally a time for peace and goodwill. Following these simple CALMS tips will help bring you the most wellbeing even with minimal leave at a stressful time of the year.

Sherylin Thompson is a registered integrative psychotherapist in private practice offering sessions in person and by Skype and can be contacted at www.skype-therapy.co.uk and followed on Twitter at @sherylin.

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