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# Staying Stress Free Over the Holiday Season

*with Dr. Kokes*

Here it comes, as it does every year, but yet still catches us off guard. The holidays are just around the corner and managing your stress may be the key to getting you through this time of year without being laid up in bed with the flu or blowing up at your family dinner.

First let's delve into a bit about stress. Stress is our body's natural response to a demand or supposed threat, it is actually a good thing. Without our stress response we would have an extremely hard time getting things done and our ancestors probably never would have made it in the world. Without our stress response our ancestors would have had a hard time running away from animals trying to eat them for dinner.

The trouble is our body doesn't situational break down stress; meaning when you are stuck in traffic or shopping for presents and searching for a spot on Spring Garden to park, our body is sending out the same response it would if you were running away from a bear. This is why stress certainly tends to build up over the holidays.

Have you ever noticed the second exams are done or right when vacation starts you get sick? When we are stressed our body releases cortisol (our main stress hormone) and short term this is exactly what we want but long term it can start to take a serious toll on your immune system. Long term increases in cortisol can negatively impact our white blood cells and natural killer cells so when we finally do get a break our immune system has a harder time fighting off whatever virus or bacteria got us.

Long term stress has many negative impacts on our body and can have an impact on everything from our memory to our eating habits. If you ever find yourself describing objects as "you know that thing... with the thing on top" or craving something salty or sweet midday then it might be time to get your stress in check. Holidays can bring out the stress response even more leaving you with no patience, tired, and run down. So here are some great options for minimising stress over the holidays.

**1** Breath: Yes, I know you do this all day everyday but I am talking proper breath work. Anytime you feel that overwhelming sensation it is key to breathe deeply. Even if that overwhelming sensation doesn't come up, practicing box breathing can help lower your overall stress levels, improve sleep, reduce anxiety, and improve your mood. There are great apps out there to help you relax as well like Calm app and Headspace app. Brain.FM is another great listening tool to get your mind relaxed. Having a daily breath work practice may be your key for getting through the holidays

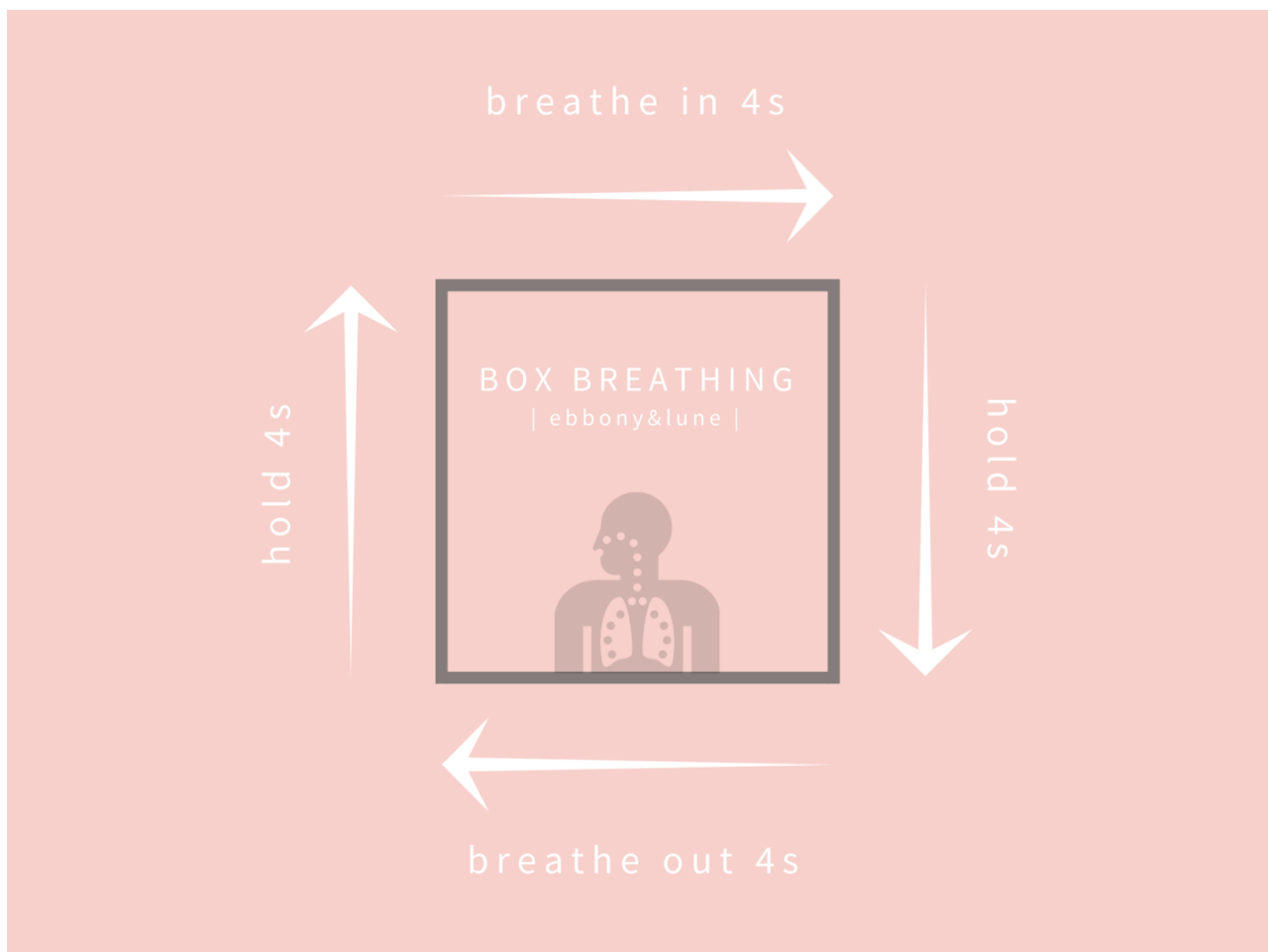


Photo from: <https://www.ebbonyandlune.com/blog/box-breathing>

**2** Shop Smart: There are so many aspects that go into shopping over the holidays. To shop smart, you need to set a budget and stick to it, you going into debt over a gift is just silly. Next up, plan ahead, make a list of who you have to buy for and start early so you can avoid the rush and panic. Shop online, this is a great way to avoid busy malls, parking issues, and stressed out people. Find ways around buying if you are strapped for cash: offer to lend a hand with a task, offer to babysit, volunteer somewhere on their behalf, make them something. Money is one of the biggest stressors around the holidays and shopping smart can be a big way to mitigate this.

**3** Eat right: Nourishing your body is so essential to stress management and over the holidays is one of the hardest times to do it. Two main issues that come up around the holidays are skipping meals while you are out and about and the second is the smorgasbord of tempting treats. When we skip meals our blood sugars can get out of control leaving us with the shakes, feeling anxious, stressed, and very moody. If you are planning a full day out shopping or pounding through the last few hours of your work days, make sure you have enough fuel and hydration to get you through the day. Pairing complex carbs with fats and proteins will also keep your blood sugars controlled and keep you fuller for longer. Treats everywhere is a hard thing to manage but some key tips are staying hydrated, fill up on the good stuff first like veggies/ nuts/ seeds/ meats, and pre-planning your meals with meal prep or delivery options like Saute. Keep things in check, a couple treats here and there is no big deal but using the holidays to completely derail will keep your stress levels and inflammation very high.

**4** Personal Time: Although the holidays are meant for gatherings of family and friends, it is very important to check in with your mental health. If you know certain family members or situations are triggering you need to put tools in place to manage your health. This may be not showing up at all events or setting timelines on the duration of your visits. The holidays can be a pretty lonely time for some people, if you know this to be the case then put some plans in place to get out and volunteer or plan some social gatherings. It is important to plan things in advance so the emotions of the holidays don't hit you hard.

5

Get some help: If you feel completely burnt out you need to reach out. I know you are so busy around the holiday season but you can't be your best if you are trying to entertain/help others with all you have left. Professional health care providers like naturopaths, nutritionists, and psychologists have some amazing tools to get you through the holiday season and can build you up once the chaos is over.



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