

Beat Holiday Stress at Work

Every person's brain runs on the Human Circadian Timeline which controls both our internal clock and our stress reaction. This means our stress levels are in direct proportion to how far off we are from our natural time cycle. At holiday time with evening events and travel disruptions it is easy to stay up too late. Even if you still make it to work on time, you will be tired, mentally fuzzy and not in top condition.



Stress and the Clock in Your Head

Stress is simply what our body systems do in response to stimulation. Even positive stress can throw you off balance. Hence the year-round term 'bridezilla' and winter's 'holiday hysteria'.

Stress causes our internal rhythms to lose synchronicity. It subverts our natural circadian rhythms or internal clock into a dis-ease progression which affects sleep, eating, working and every thing we do and feel. Our human stress response is still the same as if we were physically wounded and losing blood. This in turn breaks down the immune system and leads to weakness, healing more slowly and erratic emotional and cognitive functions.

No one has zero stress. What we need is the right type of stress in the proper quantity and at the right time. This balance is especially tough to achieve during the holiday season with the emphasis on overeating, travel and intoxicating social activities. All of which I enjoy thoroughly. Oh, did I mention yearend work as well?

When our mental skills are high, our physical sensory sensitivity is low and vice versa. We are designed to concentrate on the physical or the mental – but not to peak perform in both at the same time. We don't expect athletes to do physics in their head while they compete do we? Why so many of us work even harder during the holiday frenzy is a unique U.S. phenomenon.



Setting Your Internal Clock

To work and live at our best, we need our internal circadian rhythm in harmony with the four environmental cues below. Human beings grow faster, produce more children, enjoy better health, do better work, have more fun and live longer when our time-setting environment cycles match.

This makes it easy to understand the fact that graveyard shift (midnight to 8am) workers experience more accidents than day and evening shift workers combined. No wonder most of the worst auto accidents occur after midnight. Our bodies know we should be asleep.

More than one night of sleep deprivation leads to dull senses (vision, hearing etc.), longer reaction time, slow motor coordination, reduced memory retrieval, lowered new memorization ability and increased irritability. These are exactly the functions we need to do our best work and enjoy our holidays with family and friends. ***Sorry, there is no substitute for getting enough sleep!***

Light is Number One

Light is the most powerful internal clock-setting factor. Obviously, different mammals have different clocks; cats are active at night and sleep all day. Most people are active during the day and sleep at night. Although I have observed that right-brain dominant people are often 'night owls'. ***Everyone can use full-spectrum light bulbs to improve all visual activities while reducing stress at work and at home. Buy LED decorative lights and use 80-90% less energy to keep your holiday glow on!***



Temperature is Number Two

When sleeping temperature is above 75 degrees, both sleep and dream cycles are disturbed and people awake more often. Below 65 degrees dreams become unpleasant and contain emotional conflict. It is better to layer up and peel off clothing to match ambient temperature changes. ***If you do not control the thermostat, keep a fan and a sweater handy at work!***

Eating is Number Three

Holiday meals (e.g., high fat, more than four ounces of meat) create more physical lethargy and deeper loss of mental capabilities. It takes longer for our after-meal doldrums to lift because digesting uses oxygen that would otherwise be available for brain functions.



Eating a good breakfast/lunch before you enjoy the company party or family feast helps keep your brain from completely dissolving before you even get to dessert. ***Remember, sugar snacks make your energy and attention quickly peak and then crash lower than before.***

Sound is Number Four

The last clock-setting factor is sounds or noise. Naturally, sound is an especially strong factor for auditory dominant learners like me. However, many visual learners who downplay the effect of background sounds on their performance do notice what a difference it makes to delete that distraction.

Wear earplugs, sound-canceling headphones, or a lively music hook-up to reduce fatigue. Keep one earplug in your non-phone ear at work to cut down on background noise. Plug in both if you really have to concentrate or if the holiday music blaring everywhere is giving you a headache.

The Perfect Break

Drink a glass of water: **not soda, juice or coffee**. Walk around outside in the sunlight for ten minutes. Wear a cap to protect your eyes instead of sunglasses. Breathe in through your nose and out of your mouth. This improves your circulation, brain oxygenation and electrolyte balance for better work or play.

Morning, afternoon or evening is the best time for the perfect break.



Follow these simple recommendations and I guarantee you will have a less stressful time making your work deadlines and celebrating the holidays. May you enjoy a wonderful and safe holiday while celebrating your 2007 business successes!