

8 ways to thrive this festive season



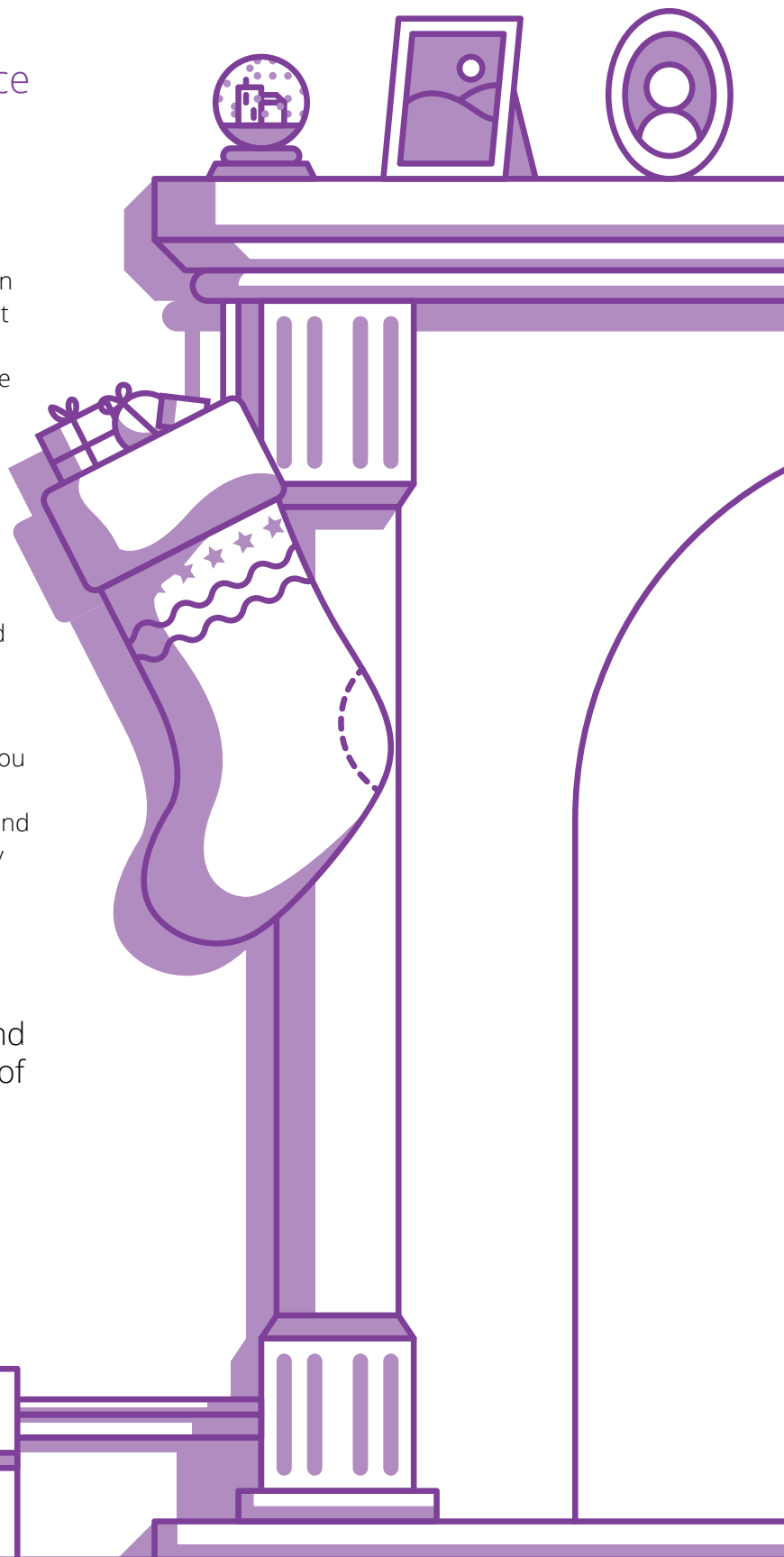
Your guide to achieving emotional and physical balance this holiday season

Christmas and the festive season can be a time of joy and merriment, but it can also be a time of increased pressure and stress. Whether there are work pressures due to a 'short' December (fewer working days than in other months) or stress and anxiety due to a family situation, the holiday season can impact our mental health.

Christmas also has an impact on our physical health as fitness regimes fall by the wayside and our diet changes – usually as sugar, alcohol and average calorie intake goes up.

We share eight pieces of advice below to help you avoid the usual seasonal pitfalls and empower you to achieve a balance of mental, emotional and physical health and well-being, and to ultimately thrive this holiday season.

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1. <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/life/2017/12/21/holiday-blues-dont-discriminate-2-1-1-big-bend-gives-hope/973044001/>

I. Managing mental health at Christmas

Winter can bring many challenges for those who suffer from depression and/or anxiety. Disrupted routines, obligations and expectations as well as stressful situations such as social occasions can all impact our mental state. In the Northern Hemisphere many people also suffer from seasonal affective disorder (SAD) at this time of year, while loneliness can become more common in the holidays.

Impact:

Those suffering from SAD may experience [symptoms](#) such as increased need for sleep, weight gain and fatigue – which can lead to decline in our mental health.

Loneliness can often especially affect expats who spend long periods of time away from friends and family. Empty nesters, the elderly and individuals who have lost loved ones or relationships may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of loneliness, according to psychotherapist Joyce Marter, LCPC.¹

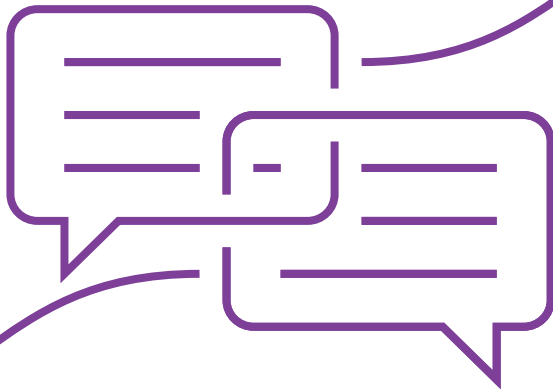
What to do:

- **Depression:** See your health care provider early to plan the right support for you ahead of the festive period. Remind yourself to focus on eating healthily, exercising and doing things you enjoy; this can have a positive impact on how you feel. You might also arrange to spend lots of time with friends and – if they are close by – family.
- **SAD and loneliness:** With reduced sun and daylight hours, many people suffer from depression related to reduced vitamin D – Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). Whenever possible get into the sun and daylight, stay active and consider light box therapy, which mimics natural light. The holidays can also bring loneliness for isolated individuals. You may not be there in person, but you can arrange a specific time and catch up over the phone or via video call. Expats living away from home may be able to get more involved in community events and programmes.



Resources:

Read [staying connected as an expat](#). Aetna International offers a range of services to support good [mental health](#) – read more [here](#).



2. Ask for what you need

Many of us suffer in silence. Approximately [one in four](#) people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year and the rate is similar in the U.S. at [19%](#). In times of heightened stress many of us don't ask for what we need from an emotional perspective. Aetna's Medical Director Dr Mitesh Patel says: "Mental health issues are ubiquitous, affecting prince and pauper, world traveller and homebody alike. But being an expat can exacerbate – or even bring on – depression and other problems."

Impact

Isolation, stress, anxiety and even depression. Poor mental health can also impact physical health. For example, stress can contribute to heart disease.

What to do

Ask for what you need from an emotional perspective, whether it's support or space. Christmas can be overwhelming with parties and work events, but you can free yourself from many of them just by communicating with those involved. Explain how you feel and what you need to help people understand.

Resources:

Mind.org's Christmas and mental health [page](#).

3. Say 'no' without guilt

Obligations and expectations play a big role in our mental well-being. Meeting other people's expectations of us can be stressful when we care what people think, and this can in turn drive unhealthy behaviours. For example, we may not want to appear rude when we decline another mince pie, alcoholic drink or even another night out. But remember, if it doesn't feel right for you, it's okay to say 'no'.

“We may not want to appear rude when we decline another mince pie, alcoholic drink or even another night out. But remember, if it doesn't feel right for you, it's okay to say 'no'.”

Impact

By accepting or doing something we don't want to do, we can end up resenting others or, worse, ourselves. Saying 'yes' under pressure can have a detrimental effect on both the mind and body: for example, pushing our alcohol intake beyond what we are comfortable with. Excess food and late nights can affect your mood.

What to do

It's important to know that you don't have to feel pressured to change your usual behaviours to please others, and you should be able to say 'no' without guilt and 'yes' because you really want to.

Resources:

Read this great article on Medium.com: [How to say no with joy and conviction and without feeling guilty](#).



4. Let it go

Christmas is a time of heightened expectations, meaning it is easy to put pressure on others. This attitude places our happiness in their hands and out of our control, which can lead to disappointment if our goals are not met.

Impact

A need for control can be stressful – especially if we don't get it – and can lead to anxiety for everyone involved.

What to do

Don't take control of people; take control of your need to control. In the moment, things seem so important: who sits where, who wears what, when things happen. If you begin to feel stressed or anxious as plans start to slide, practise mindfulness to reduce anxiety and make peace with the situation.

“Don't take control of people; take control of your need to control. If you begin to feel stressed or anxious as plans start to slide, practise mindfulness to reduce anxiety and make peace with the situation”

Resources:

Read our [beginner's guide to practising mindfulness](#).

5. Watch the pennies

[CNBC](#) found that money worries were the number one cause of stress in the U.S. As such, holidays can bring financial strain as our outgoings increase, covering everything from decorations and presents to entertaining and nights out.

Impact

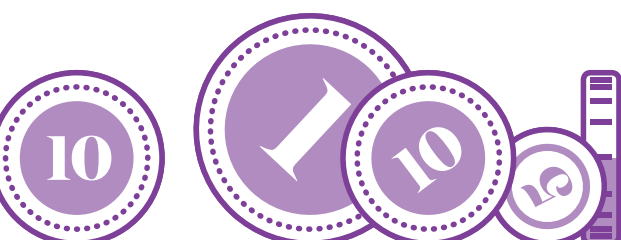
Economic stress can be acute at this time of year and the emotional impact can affect our sleep. Reduced sleep can in turn [negatively affect our immune systems](#). Economic stress may also add to the post-Christmas blues, when 'buyer's remorse' kicks in and financial realities can be seen in the cold light of a January day.

What to do

Set realistic goals and limits. Use a spreadsheet to help you manage and monitor finances to reduce related stresses or download a budgeting app for your smartphone. Don't forget that spending is not the only way to express love – enjoying quality time with each other and making home-made gifts can be very rewarding and much appreciated.

Resources:

Aetna International provides a range of personal support services (including budgeting and mental health support) as part of its [Employee Assistance Programme \(EAP\)](#). Read: [10 tips for a better night's sleep](#).





6. Avoid travel woes

In many countries, winter can bring more extreme cold weather that can disrupt both road and air travel. Christmas is also a time when many of us are travelling to see loved ones – especially expats returning home to visit family.

Impact

The combination of increased travel during times of potential disruption can mean that people don't make it home – and can often be stranded in stopovers. Such delays and cancellations can significantly contribute to holiday stress.

Resources:

Aetna International members have access to [safety and security services](#) that provide regular updates on travel and weather warnings to help you make alternate arrangements if the weather impacts your travel plans.

What to do

Plan wisely. Whether driving or flying, stay hydrated and pack healthy snacks. Make sure you've got all the medication you need for your trip. Pack your essentials in your carry-on in the event that there are issues with your luggage.

- **Flying:** Try to fly as early in the day as possible to avoid crowds on the road and at the airport. This also means that even with delays, you might not make it home as late. Try to pick the most direct route possible, limiting the potential for additional delays.

Call the airline within 24 hours of departure to confirm your flight and check again before leaving for the airport to avoid being caught at a crowded airport if the weather is already impacting travel.

- **Driving:** Get your car professionally checked before undertaking a long drive home. Make sure you have breakdown cover, provisions, a first-aid kit and a fully pumped spare tyre. The obvious things are often overlooked in the whirlwind run-up to the holidays.

7. Maintain your healthy routine

With more time off work, time away from home and an irregular schedule, it's easy for our healthy habits to fall by the wayside at Christmas. This might affect visits to the gym, daily runs, meditation, therapy/counselling sessions and diet – even time away from loved ones or other support networks.

Impact

How much you are affected will depend upon your needs and how much any given routine is disrupted. For example, a healthy eater may spend ten days overeating and/or eating poorly, which may affect their general health; ten days of increased alcohol can reduce sleep quality; a break from regular therapy sessions can mean increased stress and/or anxiety.

What to do

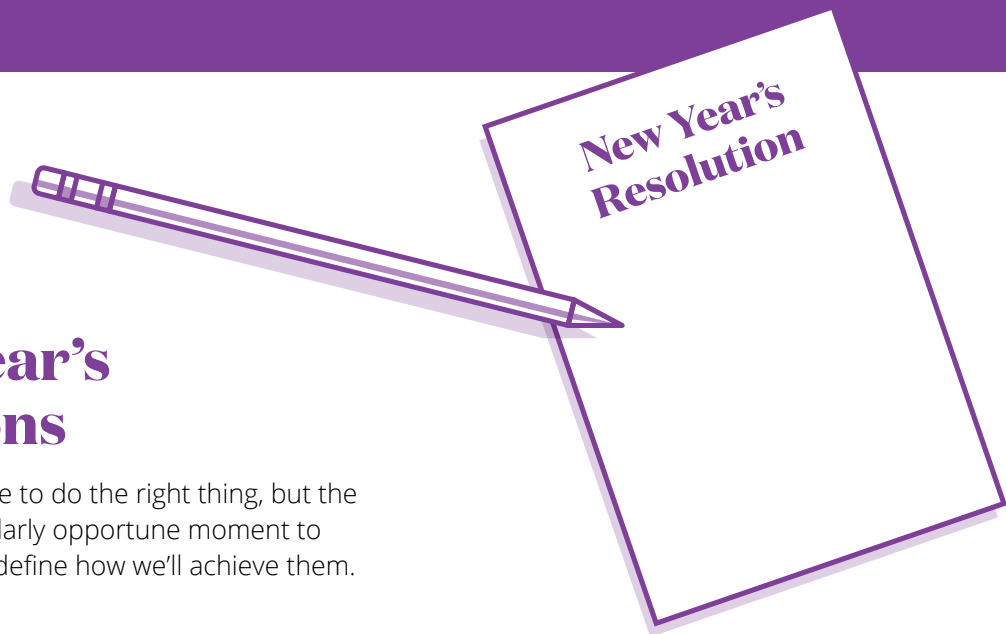
Try to keep as much of your routine intact as possible – maintain self-care and your commitment to your health goals. This can help prevent the emotional guilt trip associated with overindulging. When possible, eat normal meals at normal times, find time to exercise and meditate, and maintain healthy amounts of quality sleep. By maintaining your routine, it will make resuming normal life easier in the New Year.



Resources:

Read [9 healthy holiday tips](#) to help you maintain your health goals and activities. Aetna International's [CARE team](#) offer behavioural coaching to help you make healthier lifestyle choices while [Aetna DNA](#) can guide lifestyle choices from sleep and stress to nutrition and exercise routines.

“It's easy for our healthy habits to fall by the wayside at Christmas”



8. New Year's resolutions

It's always a good time to do the right thing, but the New Year is a particularly opportune moment to set health goals and define how we'll achieve them.

Impact

Even [small incremental improvements](#) in lifestyle choices can improve your health and wellness in the long term and raise your baseline to make future improvements even easier. Making the decision is the easy part, it's sticking to it that's the hard part – especially if one of the challenges is the work-to-reward ratio. Once your new routine becomes habit, though, it'll be easier. Remember that it can take at least [30 days \(usually around 66\)](#) for your new behaviour to become habit.

What to do

There are lots of things you can do to improve your health and wellness. You might take up a new hobby, spend more time with family and friends, get more active so you have more energy, master breathwork to control anxiety and stress, or enrol in a new course. To make your lifestyle changes easier to stick to, write a plan, including goals, pick a start date and research relevant information. You might also find a 'buddy' who can help you stick to your new regime and reach your goals.

Resources:

Here are some helpful articles to help you successfully commit to a healthier lifestyle with advice on everything from mindfulness to diet:

Diet and nutrition

[Diabetic diet: superfoods and foods to avoid for Type 2 diabetes](#)

[Cancer-causing foods and cancer-fighting foods](#)

[7 healthy eating tips for the office](#)

Exercise

[12 easy exercises to strengthen your back](#)

[6 ways to improve heart health](#)

[Workday workouts to improve health and well-being](#)

Mental health

[Everyday habits for better mental health](#)

[10 tips for better sleep](#)

[Tackling addiction and relapse prevention](#)

Mindfulness

[A guide to meditation at work](#)

[Mindfulness tips for expats](#)

DNA health testing

[An introduction to DNA health tests](#)



As an Aetna International member, you may have access to a range of services that can help and support you while you live abroad.

Health coaching

Our CARE team can provide you with health coaching around nutrition, medication adherence or exercise: for example, behaviours that can help manage lifestyle-related conditions and help people develop healthy habits. To request support through the CARE team, [login to \(or register for\) the Health Hub](#) — your online member portal.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

If your group Aetna plan includes access to EAP*, you can get started by:

- Calling the member services number on the back of your member ID card.
- Logging in to (or registering for) the [Health Hub](#) — their online member portal.

Wellness webinars

You can also access a range of webinars on topics from how to eat well to managing stress. Contact [Aetna's CARE team \(also by logging in to the Health Hub\)](#) to find out more.

*Aetna International offers support for mental and physical health concerns via its employee assistance services, which are also available as a buy up for self-paid individual plan members.



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