

eat less, rejoice more

if holiday stress drives you to eggnog, try these joyful alternatives

BY LIZ LIPSKI, PH.D.

It's not random that gyms fill up each January. I've been a clinical nutritionist for 25 years, and every year I witness the same phenomenon: My practice takes a nosedive at Thanksgiving and slumps till just past New Year's Day. Some people faithfully follow diets the entire year and blow them from Turkey Day on, gain back whatever weight they lost and start all over again on January 2.

Diet-sabotaging foods are present at every holiday—birthdays, Valentine's Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day—yet for some reason the last two months of the year pack an emotional punch powerful enough to deter even the most diligent of dieters.

Maybe it's the fact that these holidays signify that the year is winding down and imply we should too. During those two months, of course, there are tempting goodies in the workplace, at parties and family feasts. Yet shouldn't our positive self-regard be ever on the guard? Strangely, it disappears, only to magically reappear in January, accompanied by feelings of shame and self-loathing.

Therefore, for the rest of 2006 (and for years to come), I would like to propose this: Let's redefine the meaning of the holidays as a time of renewal rather than a time for winding



down. Make a resolution now to renew your body, mind and spirit as *part* of the holiday celebration.

DON'T EAT: FEEL

If you're an emotional eater, the holidays can be a particularly challenging time. Going home to see old friends and relatives brings family issues to the forefront, and the holidays conjure memories that often worm their way into the present. It's common to deal with this type of stress by "rewarding"

yourself with sweet treats like cookies, candy and cakes.

What you might not know is that the craving to soothe yourself with sweets is a conditioned one. As a baby you probably quickly learned that if you fussed or were uncomfortable, you'd get a warm, sweet, creamy, pacifying drink. As you grew up, you may have discovered that when you skinned a knee, you got a cookie. Many of us are thus classically conditioned to learn that life's distress can

be soothed with sweets.

Once you become aware of this, you have the power to break that cycle. Rather than letting your childlike emotions rule you, shift into self-preservation mode. Eating 10 cookies won't make your father less controlling and downing a gallon of eggnog won't make your sister act less competitive. Consuming food only temporarily drives away bad feelings. This year, reach for tools you can employ immediately.

Over the years I've run an eating-disorders clinic at which women make candid confessions about overeating. I would like to share how some of my clients successfully coped with stress while resisting temptation during the holidays. If you are an emotional eater, try these tips to help you break the habit of stress-related eating—at any season.

Feel the pangs What does hunger feel like in your body: A warm gnawing? A contraction? Identify what true hunger feels like to you. It's not an emotion. It's not the feeling of boredom. Or anger. Or hurt. It is a physical response that indicates your body needs fuel. If you find yourself looking for food for any other reason than actual hunger, figure out why you are reaching for food. Stop and write it down. Look at what you've written and analyze it. Food will not make it go away. Dealing with the feelings will.

Find your emotional triggers We reach for food when we're upset because it works to stuff feelings down, but ultimately it's a self-destructive behavior. What are your emotional triggers: Mom nagging you to get married? Dad having one too many drinks? Your brother acting like he's the only successful person in the family? Spend

time identifying these triggers. Then before they manifest themselves at the dinner table or a party—and they will—devise a plan to deal with them.

Devise a plan Once you've figured out your biggest emotional food triggers, jot down specific ways to deal with them when they arise. Give yourself real-life doable options: Drink a glass of seltzer water. Go to the bathroom. Dive into a conversation with a friend. Act as the party bartender. Ask an elderly relative her favorite holiday memory. Help serve dinner. Clean up. Take a walk after dinner. Dance. Remember that every time you choose something other than food, you are breaking the cycle of emotional eating.

Eat consciously When you do eat, enjoy every bite. Enjoying food is a way to nurture yourself. Don't deprive yourself of eating. But remember how much you love yourself by eating holiday foods you enjoy in reasonable portions.

Be selective Identify and eliminate your trigger foods. For most people, trigger foods contain high amounts of sugar or fat. If you can't eat just one square of divinity fudge, go without. If eggnog sets you off, choose a drink that you know you can limit. If you can't confine your nacho intake, skip 'em. Pick one or two foods that get you out of control and don't allow yourself to have them. It may sound harsh, but the payoff is worth it. Plus you might discover healthy, celebration-worthy alternatives.

Drink mindfully If you're at a party, decide if you really want to have an alcoholic drink. In fact, mull the

decision over a seltzer with a splash of your favorite juice. If you want to drink, consider a diluted drink like a wine spritzer, Bloody Mary, screwdriver or Scotch and soda rather than straight-up hard liquor or drinks with sugary liqueurs. If you decide to forgo alcohol, have a festive alternative, like a non-alcoholic Margarita. Never let anyone pressure you into drinking.

By honoring your choices, you honor yourself.

Consider a pre-holiday cleanse By heading into the holidays with a clean slate, so to speak, you'll be less likely to sabotage yourself once the parties and dinners are under way. Consult with a nutritionist to find a cleansing diet that

works for you. I often recommend a two-week program that includes chicken, fish, rice (brown and basmati), fruits, vegetables, salt, pepper, herbs and spices, non-caffeinated teas, water and just enough good-quality olive oil to make salad dressing and stir-fry dishes. Exclude all wheat, oats, other grains, dairy products, alcohol, coffee, sugar, processed foods and red meats. It will leave you feeling energized and mentally clear.

And after two weeks of healthy eating, you'll probably be less inclined to reach for high-fat or sugary foods.

Choose your co-celebrators It's not a crime to spend the holidays with people other than family members. One of my

clients decided to spend a week at a spa rather than go home for the holidays. She asked her sister to join her, and together they decided to make the holiday season a week to rejoice rather than feel the pain at the traditional holiday get-together.

Kick off your holidays with a plan. Reflect on your personal interactions with loved ones, come up with strategies to meet your needs and follow through with them. Keep in mind that while the holidays are about celebrations with family and friends, it's your holiday, too. So this year, celebrate yourself. Give yourself the greatest gift of all: a balanced, healthy holiday season.

Heidi Dvorak contributed to this piece.