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Stress can send some to hospital for holiday

75% of us feeling overly pressured

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Republican American



Dr. Shawn Carney of Northeast Natural Medicine get some equipment ready for a patient in his office in Newtown Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American



Dr. Shawn Carney of Northeast Natural Medicine refers to a book he uses for reference in his office in Newtown Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American



Dr. Shawn Carney of Northeast Natural Medicine prepares some natural medicine for patients in his office in Newtown Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American



Dr. Shawn Carney of Northeast Natural Medicine prepares some natural medicine for patients in his office in Newtown Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American



This is an example of some of the natural medicines Dr. Shawn Carney of Northeast Natural Medicine uses in his office in Newtown Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American

Have you finished your holiday shopping yet? What about writing those Christmas cards? And don't forget the casserole in the oven.

Ahh yes, the holidays: the most wonderful time of the year.

And also one of the most stressful for many Americans searching for the perfect gifts, preparing for visiting relatives or coping with the loss of loved ones.

The American Psychological Association reports that 75 percent of people say they're feeling overly stressed this year, which may come as no surprise, but the stress isn't limited to the shopping malls and family settings.

Some physicians and psychologists report an annual increase in patients who may be trying to cope with higher-than-normal levels of stress and depression.

Anxieties and worries lead some to seek help by a visit to the emergency room.

Dr. Gregory Kresel, a physician at Waterbury Hospital, said that during his 20-year career, there's been a consistent increase during the holidays in patients complaining of chest pains or depression, or simply looking for someone to talk to outside of their families. He said the hospital treats patients on a near-daily basis for stress-related conditions, often people who feel lonely. Others worry about how an unresolved issue with a family member could boil over during a Christmas dinner.

"There's no question during the holidays we see an increase in stress-related illnesses," Kresel said. "Some people will open right up about it. With others, you need to do a little digging to find out the root cause of the problem. We understand it can be a hard time, so we're always open to talk to them."

Many patients cite financial concerns as a contributing factor, but psychologists say others simply have unrealistic expectations of the holidays. Advertising and the commercial push people to purchase the "perfect gift" and to be part of the perfect family, according to Karen Steinberg Gallucci, a clinical psychologist at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington, an idyllic scenario that can become impossible to achieve.

Sometimes that push makes patients believe they are sick, when what they really need is time to relax, she said.

"Think of what's most important and meaningful rather than conforming to some image or idea that may not have relevance," Gallucci said. "People sometimes try too hard to buy into some of the images that are portrayed about the perfect family, holidays and gifts. You have to keep your expectations realistic, but positive."

While some turn to family, friends and physicians for help, others turn to food. A separate study by the American Psychological Association released this month showed 40 percent of nearly 1,000 survey participants said they ate more to cope with the holiday stress load. That stress can be compounded by the changing seasons and reduced sunlight.

Shawn Carney, a naturopathic doctor in Newtown, said he finds more patients coming in for alternative therapies for depression and seasonal affective disorder. As a physician who uses homeopathic and non-pharmaceutical medicines, Carney focuses on dietary changes and natural remedies.

He said while many patients may not visit directly because of the busy holidays, others complain of anxiety problems and look for an alternative solution, which frequently includes dietary changes.

"They realize there may be other factors that are contributing (to their stress)," Carney said. "The changes may not be immediate, but we look to find something sustainable, like more exercise."

How do you cope with stress? Post your comments on this story at www.rep-am.com.