

Rest is essential during the holidays, but it may mean getting active, not crashing on the couch

Stacy Shaw, Assistant Professor of Social Science & Policy Studies, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Published: December 18, 2025 8:35am EDT



Active leisure experiences, like going for a walk outdoors, can help reduce stress and restore energy during the holidays.

Chris Griffiths/Moment via Getty Images

The holiday season is often painted as an idyllic vision of rest, conjuring images of warm beverages and bountiful time with loved ones. But many people have trouble unwinding at this time of year. Why do the December holidays offer the promise of respite but never seem to deliver? And is more restorative rest possible during this busy season?

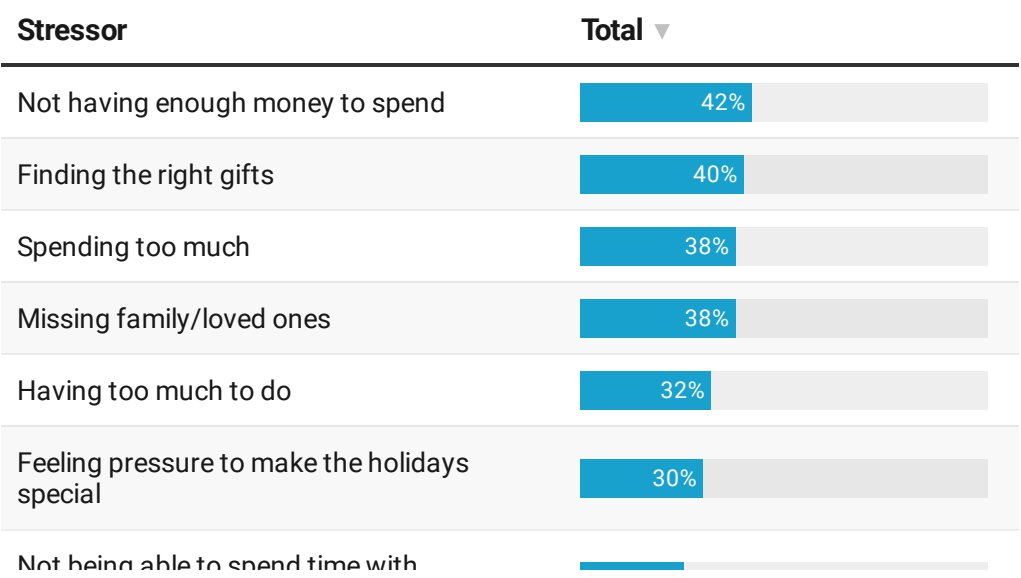
I am a psychologist who studies how rest supports learning, creativity and well-being. Sleep is often the first thing that many people associate with rest, but humans also require restorative downtime when awake. These active rest periods include physical, social and creative experiences that can occur throughout the day – not just while mindlessly scrolling on the couch.

When holiday stresses begin to snowball, rest periods replenish depleted psychological resources, reduce stress and promote well-being. But reaping the full benefits of rest and leisure requires more than a slow morning or a mug of hot cocoa. It’s also about intentionally scheduling active recovery periods that energize us and leave us feeling restored.

That’s because good rest needs to be anticipated, planned and refined.

Holiday season brings festivities and stresses

Asked which of a range of factors typically cause them stress during the November-January holiday season, respondents ranked concerns about gifts first, followed by time pressures and separation from loved ones.



Holiday stress

The winter holiday season can take a toll on well-being. Financial stress increases, and daily routines are disrupted. Add the stress of travel, plus a dash of challenging family dynamics, and it’s not surprising that emotional well-being declines during the holiday season.

Quality rest and leisure periods can buffer these stressors, promoting recovery and well-being. They also can help reduce psychological strain and prolong positive emotions as people return to work.

Effective rest comes in many forms, from going outdoors for a walk to socializing, listening to music or engaging in creative hobbies. These activities may feel like distractions, but they serve important mental health functions.

For instance, research finds that walking in nature results in diminished activation in the area of the brain associated with sadness and ruminating thoughts. Walks in nature are also associated with reduced anxiety and stress.

Other studies have shown that activities such as playing the piano or doing calligraphy significantly lower cortisol, a stress hormone. In fact, some of the most promising interventions for depression involve participation in pleasant leisure activities.

Not all idle time is restorative

So why does it feel so hard to get good rest during the holidays?

One of the most robust findings from psychologists and researchers who study leisure is that the effectiveness of rest periods depends on how satisfying they feel to the individual. This might sound obvious, but people often spend their free time doing things that are not satisfying.

For example, a famous 2002 study of how people spent their time found that the most popular form of leisure was watching television. But participants also rated TV time as their least enjoyable activity. Those who watched more than four hours of TV a day rated it as even less enjoyable than those who watched less than two hours a day.

A few years ago, my colleagues and I collected data from college students and found that students reported turning to mindless distractions, such as social media, at the end of the day, but that it usually did not leave them feeling reenergized or restored. Although this study was specifically about college students, when I presented the findings to the larger research team, one of my collaborators said, “It really makes you think about yourself, doesn’t it?” There were silent nods around the room.



Holiday tasks and rituals can crowd out time for rest, unless it’s planned into your day.

Ilona Titova/iStock via Getty Images Plus

Planning for good rest

To combat the pitfall of poor rest cycles, science suggests planning for active rest and pleasant activities, and carrying through with those plans. A large body of research shows that designing, scheduling and engaging in enjoyable activities is effective at lowering symptoms of depression and anxiety.

For the holiday season, this might mean following an afternoon of shopping with a recovery period reading a book in a quiet place, or going for a walk after opening gifts instead of immediately shifting into cleaning mode. By following a schedule, not a mood, research suggests that people can break cycles of poor rest and inactivity and achieve greater recovery and well-being.

Wrestling with guilt

Even with perfectly planned and executed rest periods, guilt can loom. Leisure guilt is a psychological construct that encompasses feelings of distress about spending time doing things that are relaxing rather than productive. It can reduce enjoyment of leisure, undercutting one of the mechanisms that link rest with well-being.

During the holidays, this problem may become even more pronounced. The season brings changes to daily routines, daylight levels and temperature, and diets. All of these shifts can deplete people's energy levels. High expectations during the holidays may make guilt an even bigger threat to rest.

If the answer to poor-quality rest cycles is planned active rest periods, then what is the solution to feelings of guilt?

Lower expectations, immersive rest and acceptance

Research on leisure guilt is in its infancy, but my own struggles have shown me a few ways to resist the pressure to be productive every spare minute. Here are some tips to fight back against the flawed belief that rest is just laziness in disguise, during the holidays and beyond.

First, I work to convince myself and my family members to lower expectations for our seasonal activities. Not every baked cookie needs to be individually frosted and decorated, and not every gift has to be wrapped with a perfect bow. By agreeing to lower our expectations, we eliminate extraneous work and the guilt of feeling that there is more to be done.



Festive doesn't have to mean perfect.

Sally Anscombe/DigitalVision via Getty Images

Second, I've found that restful activities that provide a strong feeling of immersion – playing video games, going for walks and playing with my young nieces and nephews – are a lot more restorative than scrolling on my phone or watching TV on the couch. These diversions require my full attention and prevent me from thinking about things such as my overflowing email inbox or unfinished household chores.

Finally, when I do experience leisure guilt, I accept the feeling and try to move on. During high-stress situations, accepting negative emotions rather than avoiding them can reduce depressive symptoms.

Humans need restorative periods of downtime during the holidays and beyond, but this does not always come easily or naturally to everyone. Through small adjustments and intentional actions, good rest can be within reach this holiday season.

Stacy Shaw does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license.