

'Tis the season for stress

- Holiday pressures can cause unhealthy habits

By Dan Fischer

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It's the first week of December. You've barely started your shopping, traffic is sluggish and the stores are madhouses. You're attending a party in the evening at the home of a family member you don't get along with, but the food's likely to be good, and you're already dreading the regret you'll feel at the end of the night for letting yourself get stuffed.

Teresa "Teddy" Araas, wellness coordinator at Sheridan Memorial Hospital, said the holidays can be an unhealthy time, causing stress and poor eating habits, but solutions such as a different mental approach to the season, a daily routine and a strategy of moderation can help.

According to Araas, causes of holiday stress can come from all directions: trying to juggle too many responsibilities, bad memories, trying to change or control people, expecting things to go well and then blaming yourself or others when they don't, and using food, drugs or alcohol to deal with stress.

"The stressors are being out there with everybody else," she said. "It's just the nature of the beast, the nature of the holiday season."

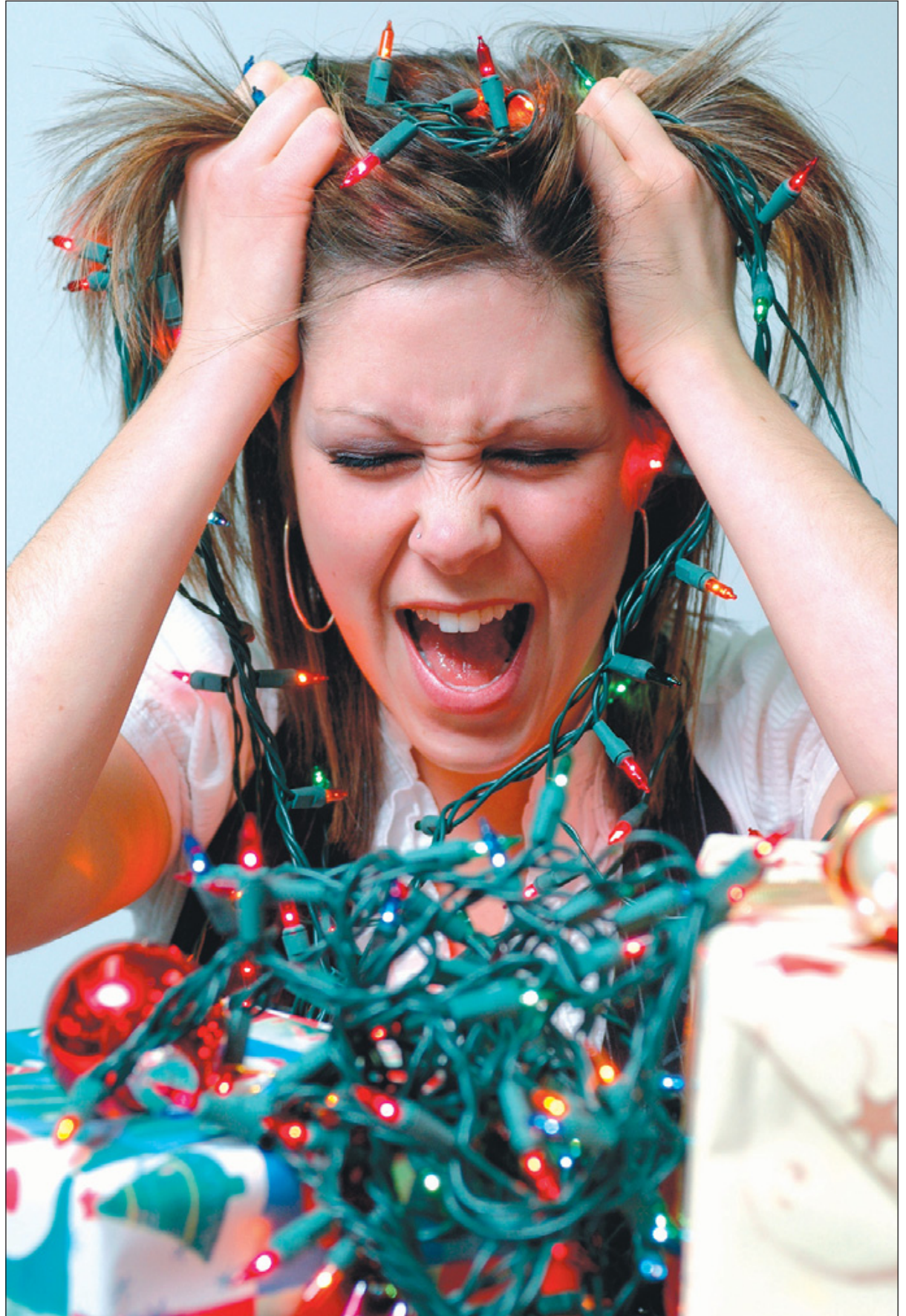
Araas said this year may be particularly difficult.

"This year, the economy is touch and go for a lot of people," she said. "People are feeling that pressure."

Stress can be serious health business.

Araas said she has seen research that connects stress to headaches, hypertension and back pain and even to more serious conditions, such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

But while the holidays might contain extra factors that can lead to stress, Araas said there are ways to combat stress.



The Sheridan Press photo illustration/Michael Sullivan

Stress

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Araas provided ideas on how to affect your attitude. Maintain a positive outlook, refuse to worry about things you have no control over and don't strive for perfection.

She also emphasized the importance of personal organization. Her tips for managing stress include prioritizing what matters, starting projects early and learning to stay "no."

Finally, according to Araas, perform activities that divert you from the holiday grind for a while, such as

getting daily physical exercise.

"Make sure that you keep on your physical schedule," she said.

Other activities she suggested include taking some quiet time and cultivating a spirit of giving by volunteering or making a gratitude list.

To make a gratitude list, Araas said, start the day by writing five things you are thankful for that will happen that day. At the end of the day, jot down five surprising things that happened that you are thankful for.

"It just really is uplifting to the spirit," she said.

Beyond stress, the holidays can pose a threat to the waistline with a tempting array of rich desserts and mouth-watering buffet selections.

Araas said more parties, events and large dinners can put people at risk for weight gain.

"Food is comfort," she said. "It's natural."

But she said completely denying oneself will only lead to giving up eventually, so she recommends giv-

ing in — a little.

"Enjoy, but in moderation," Araas said. "Don't limit yourself to only a carrot. Don't make yourself suffer."

However, she also warns of "portion distortion": the exponential growth in serving sizes over the years.

She recommends having a strategy for parties. Eat a little here and there, and if a certain friend or relative makes a great dessert, plan ahead and save room for that.

"Be a grazer," she said.