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GWU Psychology Professor Offers Information on Holiday Stress & Anxiety

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Dr. Sharon Webb Shares Tips & Techniques for Successfully Managing Seasonal Stress

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Getting stuck in traffic, helping little kids get ready for school, or managing family conflicts are daily tasks that can sometimes cause even the toughest of people to feel stressed out—particularly during the holiday season when demands on time or finances increase. Dr. Sharon Webb, assistant professor of psychology and counseling at Gardner-Webb University, says there are many psychological and physiological symptoms that people experience when they go through something they perceive as stressful.

“Perception is probably the key word, because often stress is experienced through many different kinds of events we encounter,” Webb stated. “Often times, it’s not just one thing, but it is a combination of things that we call ‘pileup’ that influences our ability to handle certain situations in a healthy way.”

A recent American Psychological Association survey found that 24 percent of Americans classified themselves as “highly stressed” in 2015 compared to 18 percent in 2014. Symptoms of extreme stress and anxiety can include chest tightness, shortness of breath, heart pounding or racing, headaches, sweating, and insomnia. Many people reported feeling increased stress as a result of this year’s presidential election, which included repetitious and widespread negative messaging.

“How often we are exposed to negative information can increase our likelihood for feeling stressed,” Webb offered. “We know that we have a locus [location] of control which determines how much we really feel like we have control over what is happening externally in our lives.

Dr. Sharon Webb

“So are we feeling oppressed? Are we experiencing historical racism or discrimination that seems to be resurfacing or is getting worse?” Webb inquired. “Relating that to some of the election information that we’ve been inundated with definitely increases, exacerbates, or creates stress that we may have thought was not there otherwise.”

Although there may not be much one can do about external factors that cause stress, Webb shares that there are many helpful coping mechanisms which can reduce the negative impact of stress and anxiety.

“We’re taught to have grace for other people, but it is important to give ourselves grace as well, and to have realistic expectations,” she reflected. “We often create our own feeling of stress because we have placed unrealistic expectations and demands on ourselves.”

Getting enough rest, exercising, and practicing proper nutrition are also tools for helping to decrease feelings of stress. In some cases, professional intervention is necessary through therapy and/or medication. Webb believes that if an individual classifies their stress as moderate to severe, they may need outside help. But if a person defines their stress as mild to moderate, they may be able to learn how to successfully cope with it.

“Stress management can be learned,” Webb encouraged. “The good thing about learned thoughts or behaviors is that anything that is learned can be unlearned or learned in more positive ways. So if we can learn to retrain our brains to think positively or perceive things—cognitively process things in a different way—we can learn to manage stress.”

To listen to the full WGWG.org interview with Dr. Sharon Webb, click below:

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University’s purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).