

December 12, 2006

## Holiday Stress

### Introduction

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The holidays are a busy time for people in the United States. From everyday stressors such as working long hours to fighting traffic, caring for aging parents and paying the bills, just when you think your life is stressful enough, the holidays arrive, adding an additional layer of stress to our already busy lives. Depending on how well you manage stress, added responsibilities can have a long-lasting impact on your body and your mind.

The objectives of this study were to explore stress during the holidays: the proximate and most important causes of stress, how holiday stress differs from stress at other times of the year, and what – if anything – people do differently during the holiday season to manage their stress.<sup>1</sup>

### Key Findings

- Holiday stress has a particular impact on women, who take charge of many of the holiday celebrations, particularly the tasks related to preparing meals and decorating the home. Women are more likely than men to report an increase of stress during the holiday season. In addition, they have a harder time relaxing during the holidays and are more likely to fall into bad habits to manage their stress, like comfort eating.
- Holiday stress has an impact on lower middle income individuals. This group feels the weight of stress from work plus the seasonal rush to find time to get everything done. In addition, their worries about money are heightened by the commercialism of the season and the pressure to spend a lot of money.
- Emotions run high during the holidays: people in the United States report feelings of love, happiness, and high spirits. The most important aspects of the holidays are the opportunities to connect or reconnect with friends and family.
- People in the United States are more likely to feel their stress increases rather than decreases during the holidays. The holidays can be a hectic time for many, and a lack of money, a lack of time, and the hype and commercialism of the season causes increased stress for people in this country.
- During the holidays, stress takes on a different character than at other times of the year. Men and women alike feel a duty to make the holidays the best they can for their families.

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<sup>1</sup> This memo is based on a random-digit dial telephone survey of 786 adults ages 18 and over. This survey was conducted October 2-5, 2006 and carries a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percentage points. For more methodological details, please see Appendix A.

At the same time, commercialism and hype run rampant during the holidays as the shops and the advertising pressure us to buy more and more expensive gifts during this, their prime shopping season. The challenge becomes whether the family will have enough money and time to execute the perfect holiday without running up credit card debt.

- Workplace stress does not disappear. Although time off work is an important highlight of the holidays, people worry about getting *enough* time off of work and that work responsibilities might interfere with time spent with the family.
- During the holidays people in the United States are much more likely to say they behave in sedentary ways like watching TV, sleeping, eating and drinking to manage their stress. Many individuals engage in comfort eating and other unhealthy behaviors to cope with their stress levels.
- Women are particularly vulnerable to increased stress around the holiday season. It is women who shoulder the majority of the family burden for shopping and holiday celebrations and they feel particular stress from the time crunch required to get everything done.
- On Thanksgiving, many people in the United States sit down with family to have the traditional Thanksgiving meal. However, women are nearly twice as likely as men to say they will do the work necessary to pull off the multi-course turkey dinner: shopping for food, cooking, and cleaning dirty dishes.
- Lower middle income people in the United States feel a financial crunch around the holidays. The struggle to afford and to purchase material goods is particularly acute for this group. Lower middle income individuals feel the pressure of commercialism and hype during the holidays, as well as the financial worries of being able to afford the holidays without running up credit card debt.
- For most people in this country, the New Year offers hope and a reminder that there is always opportunity for change and self-improvement. In the New Year, most individuals would like to improve their health or lose weight, get their finances in order, or improve their relationships with family or a significant other.

## Main Findings:

Many people reported looking forward to the holidays as a time of good cheer. The holidays are the time of year when people report focusing more on their friends and on their family. Stress does increase for certain groups during the holidays: those who feel particular responsibility for the family, like women, and those who struggle to find the extra income to afford the holidays, like lower middle income individuals.

- The holidays are, first and foremost, a joyful time. During the holidays, people report many positive emotions such as happiness (78 percent often), love (75 percent often), and high spirits (60 percent often). (figure 1)

■ **Figure 1:** Positive Holiday Emotions (percent responding “often” and “often/sometimes”)

Positive emotions during the holidays

*How often do you experience any of the following during the holidays?*

	Often	Often/sometimes
Happiness	78	96
Love	75	90
High spirits	60	89
Connectedness	40	68
Extra energy	24	64

- People love the holidays and look forward to spending time with loved ones, especially family. In an open ended question about their favorite thing about the holidays, 53 percent mention family and/or friends and 36 percent specifically mention spending more time with family.
- On the other hand there is no clear consensus about what is the least favorite part of the holidays. In an open ended question about their least favorite thing about the holidays, responses range from money to family to bad weather. Many dislike the commercial aspects of the holidays, such as shopping (18 percent), money (13 percent), and commercialism (5 percent).
- This reticence about the commercial aspects of the holidays also shows up in emotion felt around the holiday season. Though positive emotions dominate, we also see mentions of stress (61 percent often/sometimes) and fatigue (68 percent often/sometimes). (figure 2)

■ **Figure 2:** Negative Holiday Emotions (percent responding “often” and “often/sometimes”)

### Negative emotions during the holidays

*How often do you experience any of the following during the holidays?*

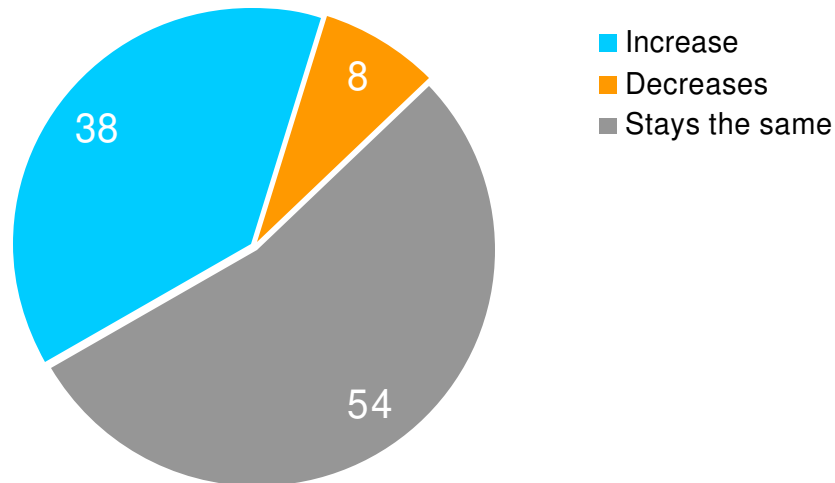
	Often	Often/sometimes
Fatigue	25	68
Stress	20	61
Irritability	11	52
Bloating	9	28
Sadness	7	36
Anger	7	35
Loneliness	7	26

- The hustle and bustle of the holidays has psychological consequences for some respondents. More people are inclined to feel that their stress increases, rather than decreases, around the holidays (38 percent increase versus 8 percent decrease). However, most people (54 percent) feel that there is no difference in the amount of stress they experience. (figure 3)

■ **Figure 3:** Holiday Stress (percent responding)

### Holiday changes in stress level

In general, during the holidays would you say the level of stress in your life increases, decreases, or stays about the same?



- Stress around the holidays is disproportionately felt by women. Women are more likely to feel that stress increases around the holidays (44 percent of women report an increase of stress during the holidays versus 31 percent of men). (figure 8) For women, stress may be a function of greater family responsibilities during the holidays. Women say they have a harder time relaxing during the holidays and are more likely to take on all of the tasks associated with family celebrations, such as shopping, cooking, and cleaning.
- People who are lower middle income (\$30,000-\$50,000 household income) are also more likely to report an increase in stress during the holidays. Half (53 percent) of people in this income range feel their stress increases during the holidays, versus 31 percent of people with lower incomes and 40 percent of people who have household incomes over \$50,000. These individuals struggle to purchase and to afford material goods during the holiday season – putting together a memorable holiday for the family, paying for travel, giving the kids the presents they want, and in the process building up credit card debt. Lower middle income people are more likely than others to report concern with money and being able to afford the holidays. (figure 13)
- Young people (under 30) are more likely to report a decrease in stress during the holidays (16 percent, versus 0 to 8 percent of older age groups). Respondents in this group were less likely to have holiday responsibilities weighing on them, and reported being college students, implying they would be on vacation.

*Leading Stressors – Money, Time, Commercialism*

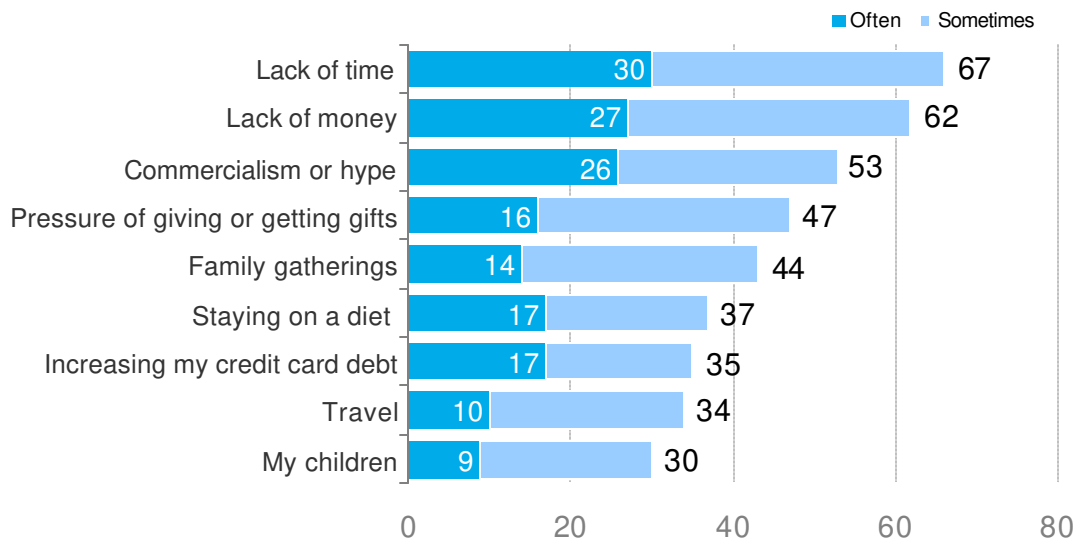
During the holiday season, people report worrying most about time, money and the commercialism of the holidays. It is a hectic time of year, where, in addition to the daily demands of work, home and health, people worry about gifts, shopping and cooking, accommodating family and decorations. Under normal circumstances, many feel there are not enough hours in the day; during the holidays, people feel pulled in even more directions. Many simply wonder where the time will come from. The holidays are also a time of year for gift giving, and people in the United States worry if they can afford the holidays or the credit card bill that will follow.

- The leading holiday stressors are time (67 percent often or sometimes), money (62 percent often or sometimes), and commercialism or hype (53 percent often or sometimes). In contrast, work and money are leading stressors during the regular year. (figure 4)

■ **Figure 4:** Holiday Stressors (percent responding “often” and “often/sometimes”)

### Leading holiday stressors

*I am going to read you a list of things that some people find stressful about the holidays. How often do each of the following cause you stress during the holidays?*

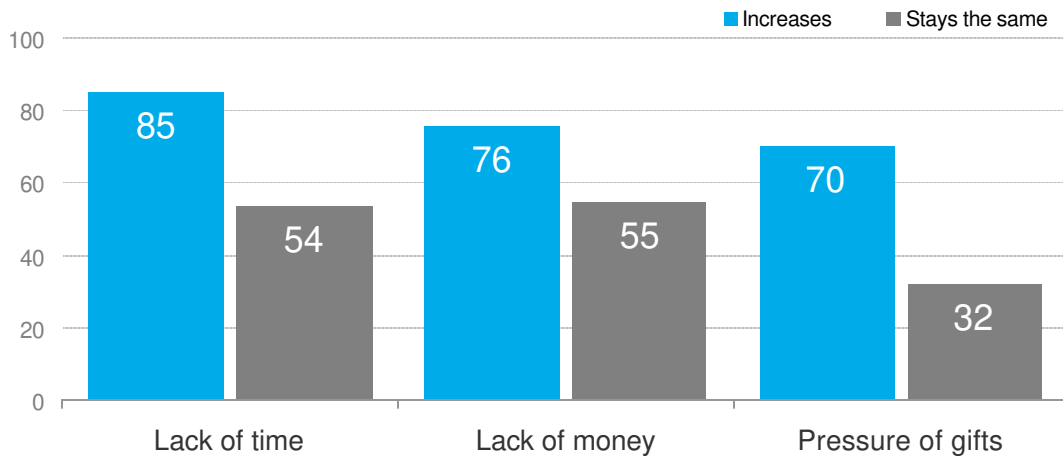


- People who report increased levels of stress during the holidays are more likely than others to worry about the financial demands of the holidays. People who report that their stress increases around the holidays are more likely than others to worry about money (76 percent often/sometimes versus 55 percent of people who report no change in stress) and having to buy gifts (70 percent often/sometimes, versus 32 percent of people who report no change in stress). People who feel more stress around the holidays also worry about finding the time to get everything done (85 percent often/sometimes, versus 54 percent of people who report no change in stress). (figure 5)

■ **Figure 5:** Holiday Concerns (percent responding “increases” and “stays the same”)

### Holiday concerns (by change in stress)

*I am going to read you a list of things that some people find stressful about the holidays. How often do each of the following cause you stress during the holidays?*



### *Work Stress Is Centered Around the Work-Family Balance During the Holidays*

As we found in research on stress during the regular year, people report that work is a bigger source of stress than the demands of home. The biggest work stressors are low salaries and wages, lack of opportunities for advancement on the job, and workload.<sup>2</sup> These stressors remain, but take on a different character when the holidays arrive. Financial issues are still leading causes of stress, but people have the additional worry about how to pull off a successful holiday given their financial challenges. During the holidays, people also feel pressure to participate in holiday celebrations at work, worry about work intruding onto family life and holiday celebrations, or if they will get enough time to spend with family.

- During the year people primarily worry about the economic aspects of their jobs. People note that low salaries have an impact on their stress levels (47 percent very or somewhat significant impact). Leading work stressors also include too heavy a work load (45 percent very or somewhat significant impact) and lack of opportunity for advancement (41 percent very or somewhat significant impact).<sup>3</sup>
- During the holiday season, work remains the primary cause of stress for most people in the United States. The majority (56 percent) feel that work is their greatest source of stress, versus 29 percent who feel the stress primarily comes from home. (figure 6)

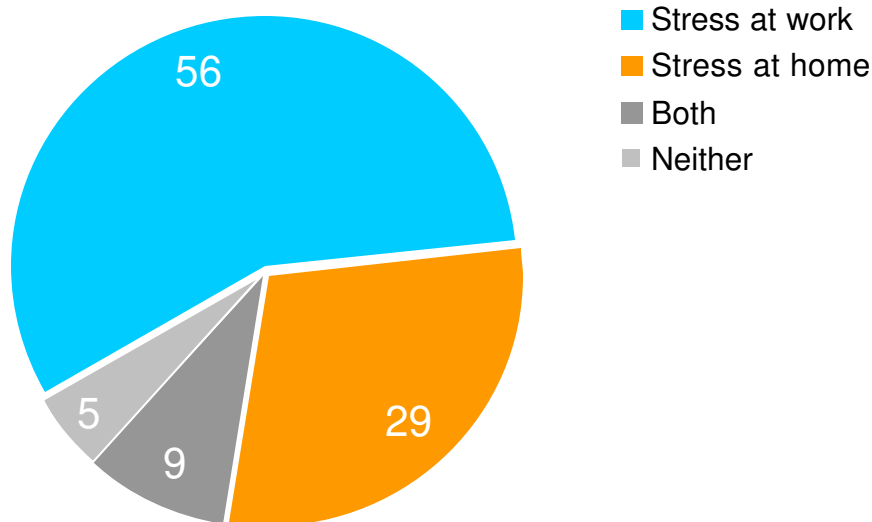
<sup>2</sup> Survey conducted January 12-24, 2006, of 2,152 adults, 18 years or older, including 403 African Americans and 434 Hispanics, by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner.

<sup>3</sup> January 12-24, 2006 survey.

■ **Figure 6:** Source of Stress (percent responding)

### Greatest source of stress: home or work

Which do you think is the greatest source of stress: stress at work, or stress at home?



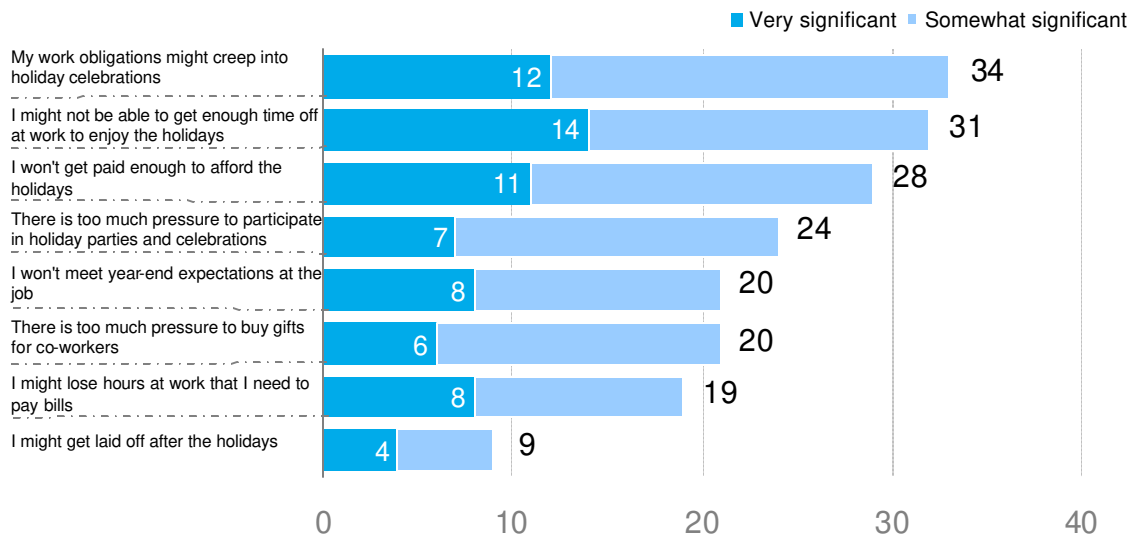
- During the holidays, however, sources of work stress change. People worry about whether work obligations will creep into their holiday celebrations; a third (34 percent) cite this as a very significant or somewhat significant impact on their stress during the holidays. Similarly, a third (31 percent) feel stress from not being able to get enough time off at work to enjoy the holidays. (figure 7)



■ **Figure 7:** Work Stressors (percent responding “very significant” and “very significant/somewhat significant”)

### Work stressors during the holidays

*I am going to read you a list of statements people say impact stress levels in their work during the holiday season. For each one, please tell me if it has a very significant, somewhat significant, not very significant, or not at all significant impact on your stress level at work during the holiday season.*



- Just as money-related subjects are leading stressors at work year-round, money also has a strong impact on stress during the holidays. More than a quarter (28 percent) say that worry about getting paid enough to afford the holidays impacts their stress level during the holidays. (figure 7)

#### *Women Feel More Stress During the Holidays Because of Responsibilities at Home*

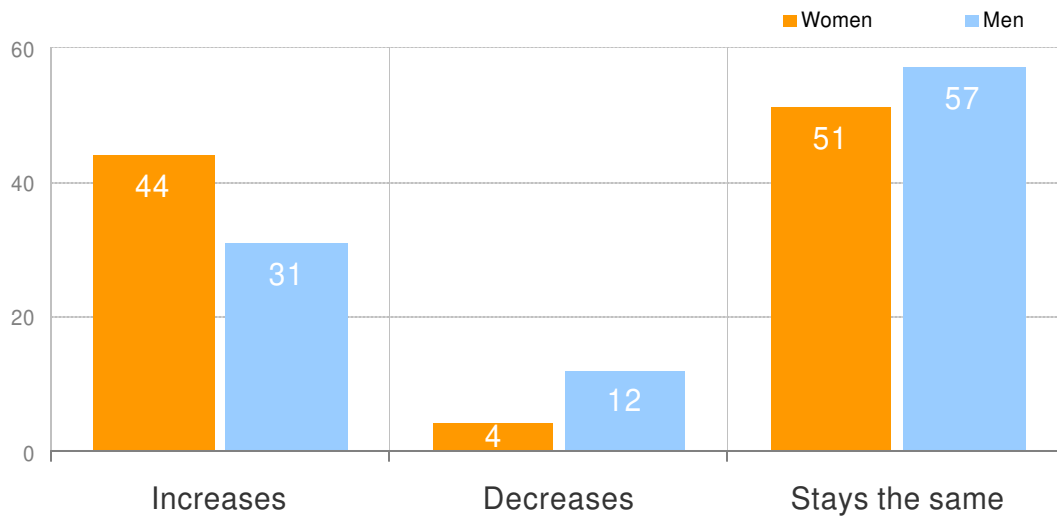
As we noted in previous research for the APA, many women struggle with the stress created by the double shift of work and family responsibilities. During the holidays, women have different and additional demands upon them, especially during family celebrations. While these added responsibilities during the holidays are not always thought of as stressful, they nonetheless make it difficult for women to relax.

- Women are more likely than men to report that their stress increases during the holidays (44 percent, versus 31 percent of men). (figure 8)

■ **Figure 8:** Holiday Stress Changes by Gender (percent responding)

Holiday stress change (by gender)

*In general, during the holidays would you say the level of stress in your life increases, decreases, or stays about the same?*



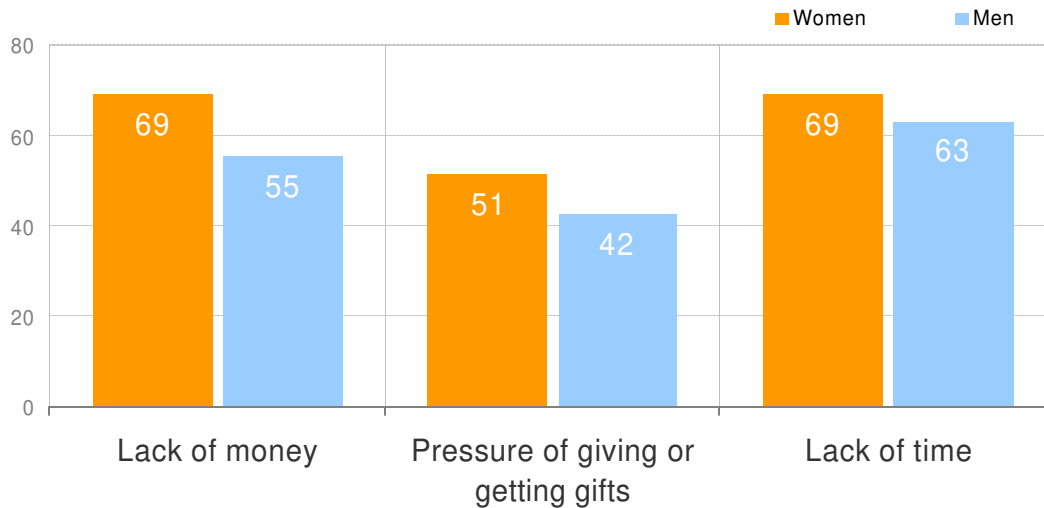
- During the holidays, women are more likely than men to feel stress from a lack of money (69 percent often/sometimes versus 55 percent of men) and pressure to give or get gifts (51 percent often/sometimes versus 42 percent of men). There is also evidence that women are more likely than men to feel stress from a lack of time (69 percent often/sometimes versus 63 percent of men).<sup>4</sup> (figure 9)

<sup>4</sup> This difference is significant at the 0.10 level, rather than the customary 0.05 level.

■ **Figure 9:** Holiday Stressors by Gender (percent responding “often/sometimes”)

### Holiday stressors (by gender)

*I am going to read you a list of things that some people find stressful about the holidays. How often do each of the following cause you stress during the holidays?\**



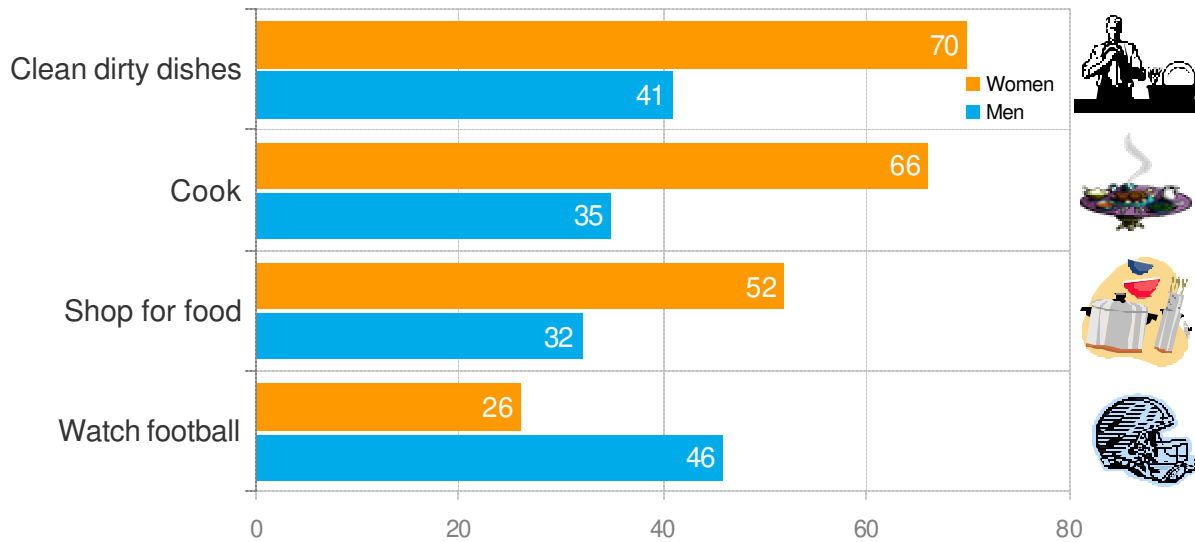
\*Value denotes percent of respondents answering total “often” or “sometimes”

- Men and women alike feel an obligation to tend to their family during the holidays. Half of men (49 percent) and women (51 percent) strongly agree that they feel a responsibility to make sure everyone in their family is happy.
- Though there are not attitudinal differences between men and women in their sense of obligation towards family, there are strong behavioral differences between men and women. Women are much more likely to shoulder the work burden during family celebrations. During Thanksgiving, women are nearly twice as likely to report that they will cook (66 percent of women versus 35 percent of men), shop for food (52 percent of women versus 32 percent of men), and clean dirty dishes (70 percent of women, versus 41 percent of men). Men, on the other hand, are nearly twice as likely as women to report that they will watch football. (26 percent of women versus 46 percent of men). (figure 10)

■ **Figure 10:** Thanksgiving Day Activities by Gender (percent responding “very likely”)

### Thanksgiving Day activities (by gender)

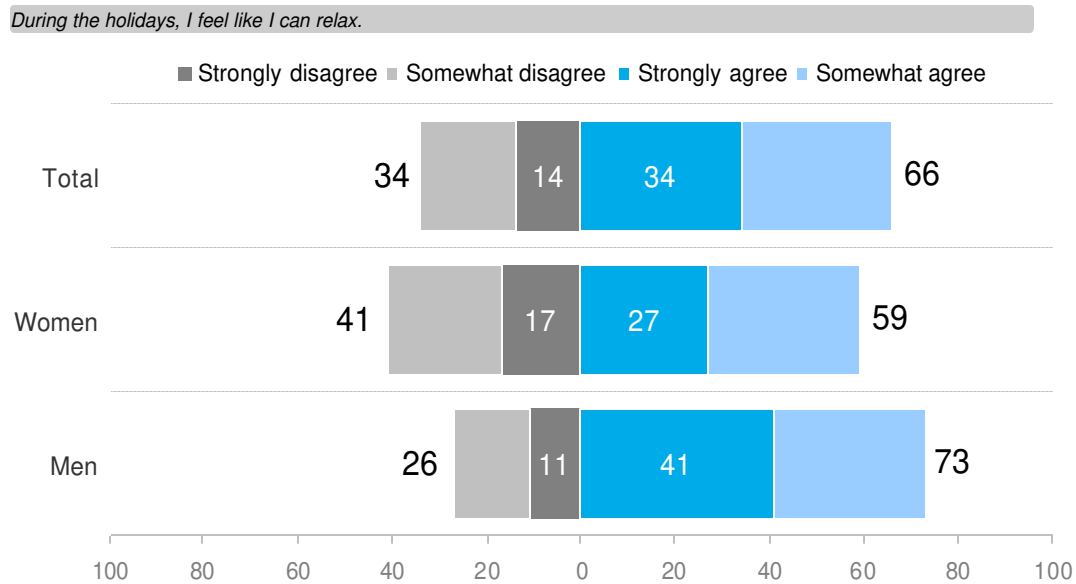
*On Thanksgiving Day, how likely is it that you will do each of the following activities? (percent responding “very likely”)*



- Men are more likely than women to permit themselves to relax during the holidays. While 41 percent of men strongly agree that they feel like they can relax during the holidays, only a quarter (27 percent) of women feel this way. (figure 11)

■ **Figure 11:** Holiday Opportunities to Relax By Gender (percent responding)

Relaxing during the holidays (by gender)



*People in the Lower Middle Income Bracket Face More Stress Because of Financial Pressures*

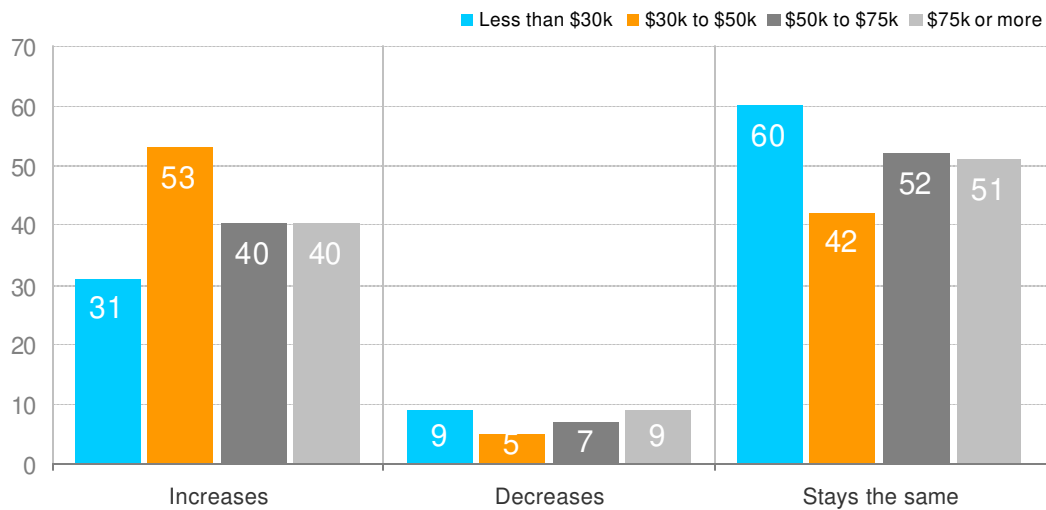
Lower middle income people in the United States (household income \$30,000-\$50,000k) face a perfect storm of financial pressures during the holidays. Money and work are sources of concern for this group year round, but during the holiday season, money concerns become amplified. Commercialism during the holidays takes a special toll with this group. Lower middle income individuals worry about building up credit card debt and whether they will have enough money to afford the holidays. This, in turn, impacts the stress they feel during the holiday season.

- People who are lower middle income (\$30,000-\$50,000 household income) are more likely to report an increase in stress during the holidays. Half (53 percent) of people in this income range feel their stress increases during the holidays, versus 31 percent of people with lower incomes and 40 percent of people who have household incomes over \$50,000. (figure 12)

■ **Figure 12:** Holiday Stress Change by Income (percent responding)

Holiday stress change (by income)

*In general, during the holidays would you say the level of stress in your life increases, decreases, or stays about the same?*

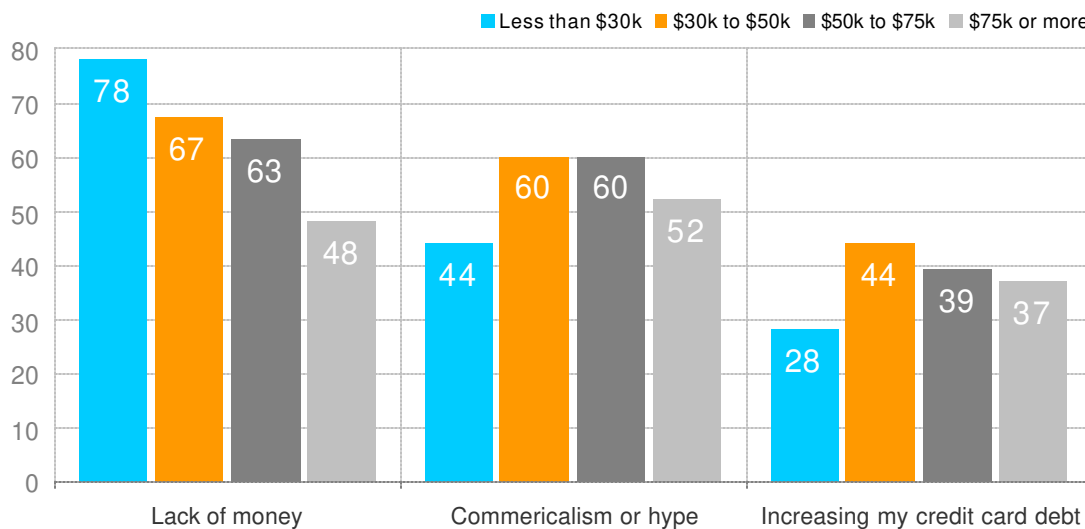


- Lower middle income individuals feel stress from a lack of money (67 percent say it often or sometimes causes them stress during the holidays) and credit card debt (44 percent often/sometimes causes them stress). This group is also particularly stressed by the commercialism and hype that surrounds the holidays (60 percent say it often/sometimes causes them stress). (figure 13)

■ **Figure 13:** Financial Stressors by Income (percent responding “often” or “sometimes”)

### Financial stressors

*I am going to read you a list of things that some people find stressful about the holidays. How often do each of the following cause you stress during the holidays?*



- Financial concerns at work drive the stress for lower middle income people during the holidays. People in the lower income brackets are much more likely than people in higher brackets to cite the impact of pay in their stress levels. For example, 36 percent of people with \$30,000-\$50,000 feel they won’t get paid enough to afford the holidays, versus 27 percent of people with \$50,000-\$75,000 and 17 percent of those with \$75,000 or more.

### Stress Management Around the Holidays

Focusing on the positive aspects of the holidays may result in people underestimating the effects of stress during the holidays. Around the holidays, people say they are not engaging in different activities to manage their stress, but the data suggest otherwise. First, people are more likely to engage in unhealthy behavior and to report sedentary activities like watching TV and sleep as strategies used to manage their stress. Second, people are more likely to report that they eat and drink. Some of this may be linked to specific holiday celebrations, but a notable increase in comfort eating can be seen around the holidays, combined with an availability of candy and sweets. On the other hand, people in the United States are likely to reconnect with their faith during the holidays, and they are more likely to mention church attendance as a means to reducing stress.

- Most people in the United States feel they are doing little different during the holidays than other times of the year to manage their stress. The vast majority of individuals (81 percent) say they do nothing different to manage their stress during the holidays.
- When asked in an open ended question what people do differently during the holidays to manage their stress, many people say they use sedentary activities (43 percent) like sleeping, and watching TV or movies. Women are more likely than men to report engaging in these kinds of activities. (figure 14)

■ **Figure 14:** Sedentary Activities by Gender (percent responding)

### Sedentary activities during the holidays

*Open-Ended Question: What do you do differently during the holiday season to manage your stress?*

	Total	Women	Men
Relax/Nap/Sleep more	18	20	15
Watch TV/Play video games/Movies/ Listen to music	31	35	28

- Inactivity is more likely to be mentioned as a stress-reducing strategy during the holidays than other times of the year. Most people in the United States report playing or listening to music (88 percent during the holidays versus 79 percent during the year). People are also more likely to report “doing nothing” during the holidays (49 percent, versus 36 percent during the year). In this context, “doing nothing” can be a good thing as well as a bad thing. It can simply mean time relaxing or being unproductive, which can be a welcome respite if people are leading hectic, busy lives. However, it can also imply inactivity and inaction. (figure 15)



■ **Figure 15:** Stress Relieving Activities During the Year versus the Holidays (percent responding)

Stress relief activities

**October 2006:** Now I am going to read you a list of things some people do to relieve stress during the holidays. How likely are you to use each of these as a way to relieve stress during the holidays? Would you say very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

**January 2006:** Now I am going to read you a list of things some people do to relieve stress. How likely are you to use each of these as a way to relieve stress? Would you say very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

	January 2006	October 2006
Listening to music	79	88
Prayer	70	76
Reading	71	71
Going to church or religious services	54	68
Exercise or walking more than 30 minutes	69	68
Eating	38	56
Drinking alcohol	18	30
Meditation or yoga	23	24

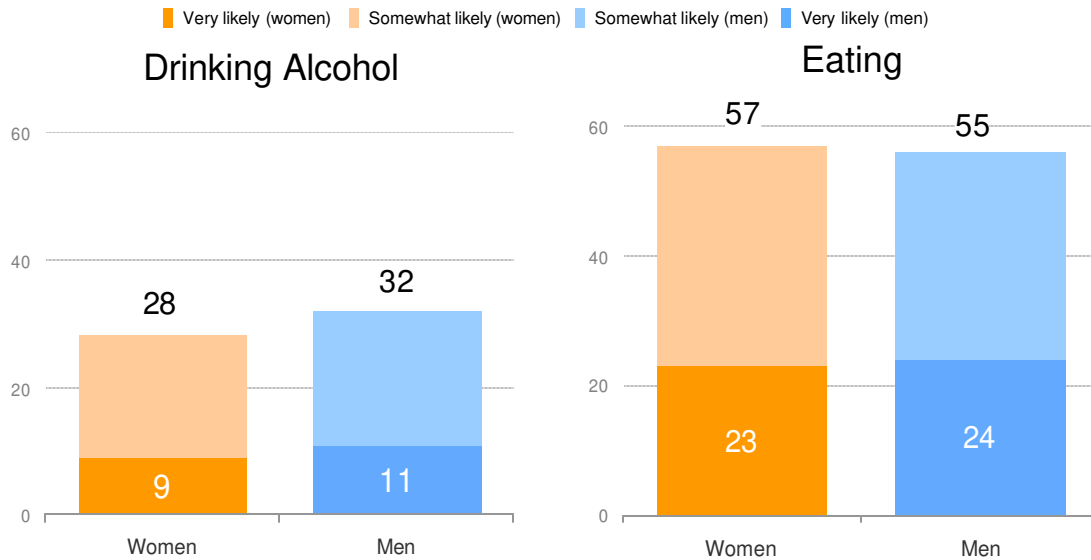
\*Value denotes percent of respondents answering “very likely” and “somewhat likely”

- Food and drink are a big part of may holiday celebrations. However, people also are more likely to turn to food as a means to reduce stress during the holiday season (56 percent report eating to reduce stress, versus 38 percent during the year). Alcohol consumption is also increasingly cited as a stress reducer around the holidays (30 percent versus 18 percent during the year). (figure 15, 16)

■ **Figure 16:** Stress Relieving Eating and Drinking during the Holidays, by gender (percent responding “very/somewhat likely”)

### Eating and drinking as stress relievers during the holidays, by gender

*Now I am going to read you a list of things some people do to relieve stress during the holidays. How likely are you to use each of these as a way to relieve stress during the holidays? Would you say very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?*

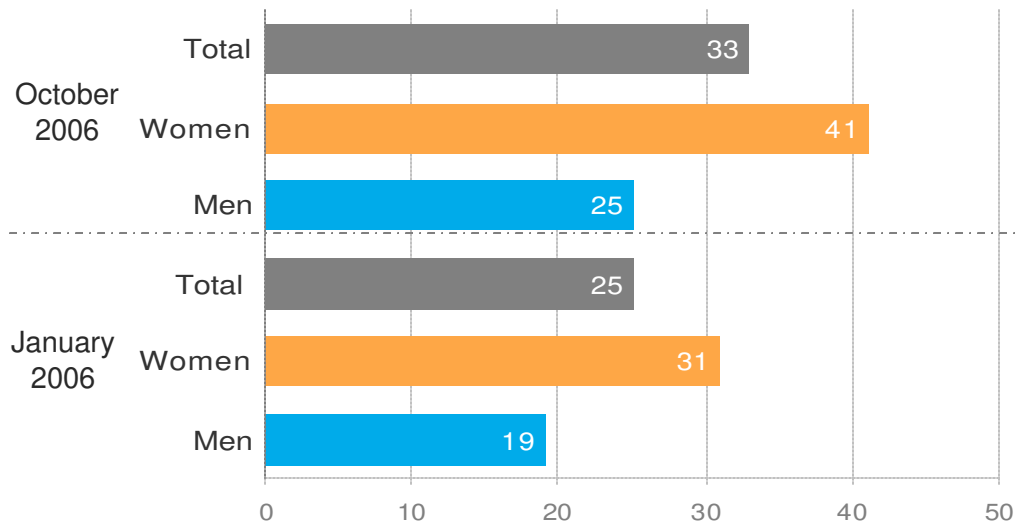


- Part of the problem with the food and drink is that these behaviors may happen repeatedly over the season, rather than being limited to a few days a year. Food, especially treats, seem ubiquitous during the holiday season whether at work or at home; 85 percent agree cookies and candy are always around (67 percent strongly). Given the access, people in the United States are likely to be snacking more often than they realize around the holidays.
- Comfort eating increases during the holidays. During the year, one in four people in the United States agrees that “when I am feeling down or facing a problem, I turn to food to help me feel better.” During the holiday season, this percentage increases to one in three people in the United States. (figure 17)
- Comfort eating increases among both men and women, but is more common among women. During the holidays, 41 percent of women agree that they eat for comfort (compared with 31 percent during the year). Among men, 25 percent report comfort eating (compared with 19 percent during the year). (figure 17)

■ **Figure 17:** Stress Eating During the Year versus the Holidays by Gender (percent responding "strongly agree/somewhat agree")

Stress eating (by gender)

*Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: When I am feeling down or am facing a problem, I turn to food to help me feel better.*



\*Value denotes percent of respondents answering total "agree"

- On the other hand, some healthy habits increase during the holidays. People in the United States feel that they reconnect with their faith during the holidays (70 percent agree, 40 percent strongly agree). This may happen due to the religious nature of some of the holidays, but it can also serve as an important antidote to the commercialism of the season. During the holidays, individuals are more likely to engage in spiritual practices to manage their stress. Many people in the United States report that they use prayer to manage their stress (76 percent during the holidays versus 70 percent during the year). People in the United States are also more likely to report attending religious services as a way to manage their stress (68 percent during the holidays versus 54 percent during the year).

*Celebrating the New Year*

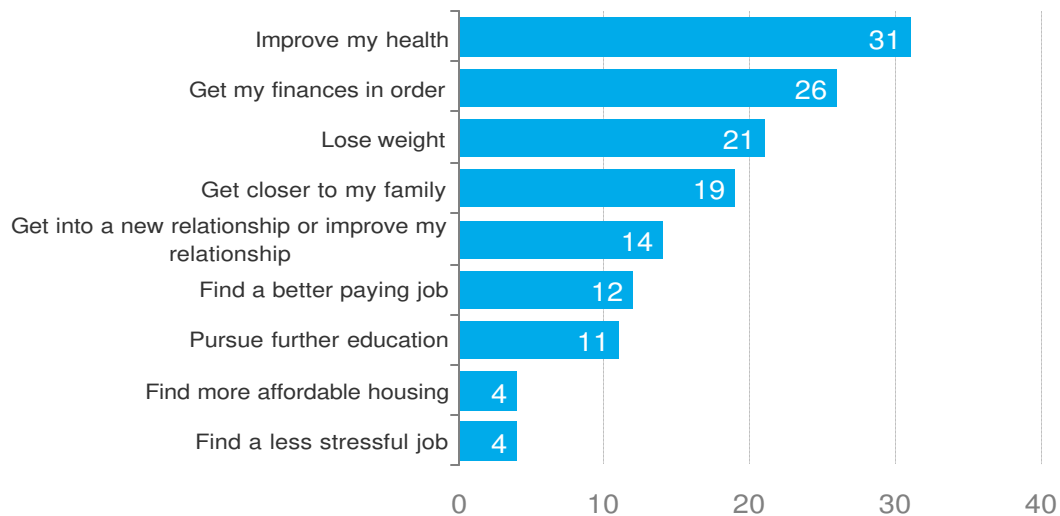
Refreshed from the festivities of the holidays, the New Year presents hope for better things to come. Many people in the United States have clear aspirations about what they can achieve for themselves and for their families in the future. Most of those hopes pertain to self-improvement.

- Above all, people in the United States want to improve themselves in the New Year. Most commonly, individuals want to get healthier (31 percent mention), however, many also mention wanting to lose weight (21 percent mention). Finances are a common goal, as 26 percent of individuals wish to get their finances in line (26 percent mention). And, especially in the context of the family celebrations that happen in the holidays, many wish to improve their relationships, either by getting closer to family (19 percent mention) or by finding or improving their relationship with a significant other (14 percent mention). (figure 18)

■ **Figure 18:** New Year’s Resolutions (percent responding)

New Year’s resolutions

*Now, I am going to read you a list. Which of the following would you most like to accomplish in the New Year?*



- Less commonly mentioned on the list of priorities are aspects of work. Only 12 percent of people in the United States mention wanting to find a better job, and only 4 percent aim to find a job with less stress in the New Year. For the most part this is because people feel comfortable that they know what is coming from their jobs. Relatively few people worry that they will be laid off after the holidays (9 percent) or fail to meet year end expectations (20 percent).

## Conclusion

It is the holiday season, and for many people in the United States, that means a time to splurge. The holidays can be a hectic time, where shopping, cooking, and party planning get added to the list of things to do. People wonder where they will find the time and money to get everything done. It is during these times that many people experience an increase in stress that can detract from the celebrations and downtime that they seek. Many individuals, but especially women, fall into practices like comfort eating (because food is always around) or sedentary activity (because they are more likely to have time off work) to manage stress. Women in particular need to be mindful that their responsibilities may have more stressful consequences than they realize, and that they are reacting to the stress in unhealthful ways, like eating and not permitting themselves to relax.

Family relationships are top of mind during the holidays. However, work is a big driver behind concern and still atop the list of life's stressors. It is jobs that may or may not provide enough income to create the perfect holiday, and it is jobs that present challenges to spending time with the family.

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## Appendix A: Methodology

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner designed and administered this telephone survey conducted by professional interviewers. The survey reached 786 adults, 18 years or older. The survey was conducted October 2-5, 2006. Telephone numbers were generated by a random digit dial process, thereby allowing access to all listed and unlisted phones. The sample was stratified by state. The data were weighted by gender, age, race and education to ensure an accurate reflection of the population. The sample size with these weights applied is 786.

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## Appendix B: Author Biographies



### Anna Greenberg

Anna Greenberg is Vice President of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. Greenberg advises campaigns, advocacy organizations and foundations in the United States. She is a leading polling expert and has been called “one of the smartest of the younger Democratic consultants.”



### Jennifer Berkold

Jennifer Berkold advises non-profits, foundations, and campaigns on public attitudes on a variety of political and sociological issues. Berkold has a background in social science research and survey methodology drawn from the academic, non-profit, and for profit sectors.