**Healthy Holidays Challenge Weekly Emails**

**Introducing the challenge email**

Welcome to the Healthy Holidays Challenge! The Healthy Holidays Challenge is designed to encourage employees to improve or maintain their healthy habits during the holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year’s. Increased obligations, shorter days, family conflict, financial strain and loneliness can turn an otherwise happy season into a very stressful time of year. While not everyone celebrates holidays during this time of year, practicing healthy habits benefits everyone all year long.

This eight-week program encourages mindful eating habits, being physically active, managing stress and getting enough sleep during the holiday season. By adopting healthier habits, employees will feel better, improve their mental health, and decrease their risk factors for chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other lifestyle-related illnesses.

The challenge will run from **Monday, [date before Thanksgiving] through Sunday, [date after New Year’s Day]**

Attached is the Healthy Holidays Challenger Tracker. Fill out this tracker each day you practice a healthy habit. Anyone who tracks healthy habits for at least 5 days each week will [win / be entered into the raffle for] [what prizes?].

Submit your tracker **by [date 3-5 days after end of challenge]** to [who? how?] to be eligible for the [raffle / prizes]

**Week 1 email – Healthy Holidays: Embracing mindful eating & managing holiday indulgence**

The holidays are a time for celebration, and that means delicious food! It can be hard to find balance with food especially during the holidays. If you experience food guilt during this time of year – you are not alone. By practicing mindful eating, you can manage indulgence while still enjoying your favorite foods. Here are some tips to help you incorporate mindful eating and overcome food anxiety during the holidays.

* Allow yourself to enjoy holiday treats without guilt: Try to reframe negative connotations around food. You are allowed to enjoy delicious holiday meals! Try to think of how you can add nutrient dense foods to your diet vs. restrict things you enjoy. For example, include some protein and veggies alongside holiday treats for nutritional balance.
* Avoid skipping meals: Eating nutrient dense meals will help keep you fuller longer. By focusing on nourishing foods as a foundation, you will be in a better mindset to listen to your body’s unique needs and hunger levels when deciding what to eat. Remember to stay hydrated as well.
* Be present: Food is a wonderful way to gather people for the holidays – enjoy it! Focus on the experience and savor your meal - this can keep you from mindless eating.
* Give yourself grace: Every day is different. Tune into your own personal needs and see what feels best for you on any given day. Healthy eating does not have to be all or nothing!

By being mindful, you can enjoy delicious holiday foods while staying in control of your health and wellbeing.

**Week 2 email – Healthy Holidays: The importance of physical activity**

For many, the holidays are one of the busiest times of the year. Between parties, family obligations, traveling, shopping, etc., there’s less time for exercise. Regular exercise, however, can help alleviate holiday stress, as well as improve your overall health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Here are some ways to incorporate physical activity into your hectic holiday schedule.

* Move more. Use the stairs. Take a walk at lunch. When you are running errands, park farther away so you can move as much as you can. Basically, anytime there’s a chance to move, do it if able.
* Make it social: Start a walking group at work. Keep your dog happy with a quick run. Encourage your loved ones to try new active holiday traditions, such as going for a group walk or doing an outdoor winter activity!
* Break it up: If you don’t have time for a full workout, split it up into a couple of 15-minute workouts or three 10-minute walks. You will get the same health benefits.
* Fit in fitness in a way that works for you: Fitness looks different for everyone, especially during the holiday season. Try to find a schedule and workouts that are attainable and that you enjoy.

One way to make sure you’re getting enough exercise is to track it. You can use the American Heart Association’s Activity Tracker to track your activity, and it’s free! By prioritizing physical fitness during this challenge, you are working to improve your overall wellbeing, reduce stress, and take time for yourself.

**Week 3 email – Healthy Holidays: Setting and sticking to a budget**

Despite being the “most wonderful time of the year,” financial concerns are a common stressor during the holiday season. In fact, spending too much or not having enough money to spend is the #1 reported source of holiday stress. Traditions and the pressure of finding the perfect gift for a loved one can make it easy to overspend. By creating and sticking to a budget, you can enjoy the season to the fullest while keeping your finances in check. Here are some tips to help you plan a holiday budget and stick to it.

* Create a goal budget: Determine how much you are willing to spend in total this season. Include gifts, decorations, food, travel, and everyday expenses. Add these together and determine the areas you can cut back on to save.
* Track your spending: Use a spreadsheet or budgeting app to track all your expenses. If you can see your expenses adding up, you will be less likely to overspend.
* Look for deals: Take advantage of discounts and sales. Planning out your shopping list early will give you enough time to research deals and find affordable alternatives.
* Limit extravagant gifts: Consider challenging yourself to make homemade gifts. Although they may take more time, homemade gifts such as cards or baked goods will help you save money and show loved ones how much you care.

The holiday season can be a happy yet stressful time due to financial burden. To manage this stress, it’s important to take care of your mental health this season and stick to a realistic budget.

**Week 4 email – Healthy Holidays: Making time for self-care.**

It is crucial to take care of your wellbeing during the holidays. During this time of year, it’s easy to get wrapped up in commitments and lose sight of your own needs. Before you can give to others, it is important that you give back to yourself. Here are a couple of ways that you can prioritize self-care throughout the holiday season.

* Make time for what’s important to you: The holidays are busy, but it’s important to set aside time to do things you enjoy! Whether that be finding time to exercise, read, spending time with loved ones, or doing whatever fills your cup. Try to find things to keep you grounded amidst the stress of holiday activities.
* Set boundaries: Along with the holidays comes conflicting responsibilities. It’s okay to say no to extra obligations that full up your schedule. Focus on activities that bring you joy and relaxation.
* Unplug: Screen time during the holidays can be filled with advertisements urging you to “shop now” – this can be overwhelming and take a toll on your mental health. Take a break from checking your phone and email. Instead, enjoy a long bath, go for a nature walk (exercise is a great stress reliever!), or play a board game with your friends or family. Just be present and happy in the moment.
* Get a good night’s sleep: Give yourself the gift of a good night’s sleep. Getting enough sleep has several benefits for your physical and mental health, leading to a happier and healthier you.

Scheduling time for self-care can help prevent holiday burnout and boost mental wellbeing. Make sure you find time to practice self-care this week – whatever that looks like for you!

**Week 5 email – Healthy Holidays: Stress management techniques**

According to the American Psychological Association, nearly 9 in 10 (89%) of U.S. adults say that concerns such as financial pressure, family conflict, and missing loved ones cause them stress during the holidays. This can have you just trying to get through the holidays instead of enjoying them. Thankfully, there are several ways to combat stress during the holiday season. Here are some tips you can implement through the next couple of weeks to manage seasonal stress.

* Plan ahead: Finding time for all of your holiday activities can be difficult. Try to stay organized by creating schedules for shopping, cooking, and events to reduce last minute stress. Planning will help you ease uncertainty and work out problems before they arise.
* Set realistic expectations: Try to not overbook yourself. With several competing responsibilities, you can become burnt out. Focus on quality time with loved ones rather than perfection of things like decorations and gifts. When you are feeling overwhelmed, schedule time to practice self-care.
* Incorporate mindfulness: Try to stay present. It is easy to let your mind wander to the looming list of gifts you need to buy or people to send cards to. Try to enjoy the current moment and incorporate gratitude.

Unfortunately, stress is something that comes with this time of year. By implementing stress management techniques, you can help reduce the negative effects stress has on the body and improve your overall wellbeing. Try to incorporate these techniques for the remainder of the challenge to make the most of your holiday season!

**Week 6 email – Healthy Holidays: Prioritizing sleep**

The holiday season is one of the busiest times of the year. Between festivities and everyday responsibilities, your sleep quality could suffer. Getting enough sleep plays a significant role in overall health and emotional wellbeing. The CDC recommends adults get 7-9 hours of sleep daily. Lack of sleep during the holidays can lead to a significant toll on physical and mental health. Not getting enough sleep can lead to decreased concentration, weakening of your immune system, and increase of stress levels. Here are some tips on how to prioritize sleep this holiday season.

* Unplug: Shut down your electronic devices at least 30 minutes before bedtime. This will help you relax and let your body know it’s time to wind down.
* Avoid caffeine in the afternoon: Although it can be tempting to have caffeine get you through an afternoon slump, it could be keeping you from getting a goodnights sleep. Try to keep your caffeine consumption minimal in the afternoon.
* Set a sleep schedule: Try your best to go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day. This can be difficult during the holiday season – but will help you stay well rested and equipped to manage the day!

Prioritizing sleep is critical for overall wellbeing. Implementing these tips can help you feel well rested and ready to welcome the holiday season.

**Week 7 email – Healthy Holidays: The importance of social connection**

While the holidays are typically thought of as cheerful, it can also be a lonely and isolating time for many. For individuals who have lost loved ones or are struggling with mental health, the holidays can present unique emotional challenges. If you are struggling this holiday season – you are not alone. Here are some tips on how to navigate isolation, grief, and other barriers during the holidays.

* Stay connected: Studies emphasize the importance of social interaction on alleviating sadness. During the holidays, push yourself to attend community and social events. This can help create a sense of belonging.
* Honor loved ones you have lost: It can be difficult to celebrate the holidays after losing a loved one. Spend time reflecting on special memories with them – you could even incorporate their favorite holiday tradition into your own.
* Get involved in your community: Engaging in community service will help you build connections and make a meaningful difference in people’s lives. This can create a sense of purpose and social inclusion.

While the holidays hold unique challenges for everyone, there are several tactics you can use to alleviate sadness and create a more fulfilling season.

**Week 8 email – Healthy Holidays: Reflect, celebrate, and set goals for the new year**

Happy New Year and congratulations on making it to the final week of the challenge! As our 8-week holiday health challenge ends, take some time to reflect on all your hard work. Celebrate the progress you’ve made and healthy habits you’ve formed. This challenge focused on balance, boundaries, mindfulness, connection, and setting attainable goals. As we head into the new year, think about how you can build on what you have started. Set new goals focused on your wellbeing. Using the S.M.A.R.T goal technique is one way to set yourself up for success in the new year.

SPECIFIC: What is your goal?

MEASURABLE: How will you know when you’ve reached it?

ATTAINABLE: Is it in your power to accomplish it?

REALISTIC: Can you realistically achieve it?

TIMELY: When do you want to achieve it?

By continuing the healthy habits, you have adopted over the past 8 weeks and setting goals for the new year, you’re well on your way to being a happier and healthier you!