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For a more peaceful life, reduce stress

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Peace on Earth is an oft-repeated and enduring message during the holiday season. But how many of us stop to think about how we can make our wish come true, or how the pursuit of peace could positively affect our lives?

Of course, we all pray for global peace, a time when there are no wars and mankind is enlightened to agree that conflicts can be settled through diplomacy and mutual respect for our cultures and diversities. That day will come, but only when we are focused collectively on the many goals we have in common, rather than dwelling on our few differences.

In the meantime, we can hasten our quest for peace on Earth by creating peace in our daily lives. Not only will that make you happier, it will make you healthier.

The stress and anxiety that many people experience year-round are amplified during the holidays. Family gatherings, parties, shopping and traveling consume our time and energy. When added to already-hectic schedules, those tasks can take a terrific toll on our bodies.

Your heart is particularly susceptible to the negative side effects of stress, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed, which trigger vasospasms. Symptoms include increased heart rate, heart rhythm disturbances and tightness in the chest. If excessive alcohol consumption accompanies this increased stress, it could result in holiday heart syndrome, which can be dangerous and lead to ulcers, stroke or a heart attack.

Eliminating stress and anxiety can counter all these scary symptoms. Relaxation, laughter and an overall sense of happiness not only can prevent the onset of those harmful symptoms, it can actually heal your heart over time. Chest constrictions ease and breathing becomes easier when you are less stressed. Your blood pressure goes down as your outlook goes up.

So, how do you overcome stress?

The first step is to understand that stress needs to be managed year-round. Stress, like emotions and boxes in

your garage, accumulates over time until it reaches a point that it must be purged. The trick, of course, is to dispense with it a little at a time so it does not accrue.

The new year presents a convenient and timely opportunity to make changes in your life. For instance, you can:

- Resolve to do more good deeds; doing so will make you feel better about yourself, which will relieve your stress as well as the person you are helping.

- Encourage laughter at your workplace or at your dinner table. At my business, for example, we combat stress by telling jokes and sharing humorous stories. Think about it: If a customer walks into your business and everyone is smiling and laughing, it immediately puts them at ease. Reduced stress among your co-workers also combats lost productivity at work, so it helps the employer's bottom line to foster that attitude.

- Get to know your neighbors. If there is a person you do not know who lives within 50 yards of your house, find the time to knock on their door and introduce yourself. Tell them you are there if they need them and assure them you are committed to making your neighborhood a friendly, safe place.

- Exercise: This suggestion probably isn't new to you, but exercise remains one of the best ways to relieve stress and ensure your heart will be healthy for many years to come.

- Make sure your house is a home: Every member of your family should know that their home is a haven, a place where they are safe, protected and loved. They need to know that if they are stressed out, home is the first place to seek — and receive — help.

Let the lawmakers in Washington debate health care reform. Let the insurance and pharmaceutical companies fret about their profit-and-loss statements. Let Wall Street look for ways to adopt physicians' oath to "do no harm." While they all are busy doing that, you can reform your own habits to alleviate stress and anxiety in your life.

It starts with changing the psychology of fear and creating a culture of peace. It proceeds to receiving our creator's blessings of good health and love, and passing them on to the people we care about. And, if we are sincere and determined, it ends with peace on Earth.