

HOLIDAY DEPRESSION

by Danielle Melanson

The holiday season can be a time full of joy, cheer, parties and family gatherings. But for many people, it is a time of self-evaluation, loneliness, reflection on past failures and anxiety about an uncertain future.

What Causes Holiday Blues?

Many factors can cause the “holiday blues”: stress, fatigue, unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, financial constraints, and the inability to be with one’s family and friends. The demands of shopping, parties, family reunions and house guests also contribute to feelings of tension. People may also develop other stress responses such as headaches, excessive drinking, over-eating and difficulty sleeping. Even more people experience post-holiday let down after January 1. This can result from disappointments during the preceding months compounded by the excess fatigue and stress.

Coping with Stress & Depression During the Holidays

Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable. Try to set realistic goals for yourself. Pace yourself. Organize your time. Make a list and prioritize the important activities.

Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Don’t put the entire focus on just one day (i.e., Thanksgiving Day). Remember that it’s a season of holiday sentiment, and activities can be spread out to lessen stress and increase enjoyment.

Remember the holiday season does not banish reasons for feeling sad or lonely; there is room for these feelings to be present, even if the person chooses not to express them.

Leave “yesteryear” in the past and look toward the future. Life brings changes. Each season is different and can be enjoyed in its own way. Don’t set yourself up in comparing today with the “good ol’ days.”

Do something for someone else. Try volunteering some of your time to help others.

Enjoy activities that are free, such as taking a drive to look at holiday decorations, going window shopping or making a snowperson with children.

Be aware that excessive drinking will only increase your feelings of depression.

Try something new. Celebrate the holidays in a new way.

Spend time with supportive and caring people. Reach out and make new friends, or contact someone you haven’t heard from in a while.

Save time for yourself! Recharge your batteries! Let others share in the responsibility of planning activities.

Stress-relief benefits from a belly laugh

Laughter's health benefits are no joke. A good sense of humor can't cure all ailments, but data are mounting about the positive things laughter can do.

Short-term benefits A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body. Laughter can:

Stimulate your organs. Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.

Activate and relieve your stress response. A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.

Soothe tension and stomachaches. Laughter can also ease digestion and stimulate circulation, which helps reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

Long-term effects Laughter isn't just a quick pick-me-up, though. It's also good for you over the long haul. Laughter may:

Improve your immune system. Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can impact your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.

Relieve pain. Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.

Increase personal satisfaction. Laughter can also make difficult situations a little bit easier.

Be honest with yourself. Is your plate piled too high with deadlines and obligations that you're trying to squeeze in between meetings? Are you trying to cram too many activities into too little time? If so, stress relief can be as straightforward as just saying no.

Why say no?

There are countless worthy requests out there just waiting to eat up your free time and increase your stress. It's easy to create stressful situations in your life if you don't turn down requests for your time and talents.

If you don't, who will make costumes for the school play or coach your children's Little League team? The answer may not be simple, but you should still consider these reasons for making sure it's not you.

Saying no can be good for you. Saying no is not a selfish act. In fact, it may be the most beneficial thing that you can do for your family and your other commitments. When you say no, you'll be able to spend quality time on the things you've already said yes to.

Saying no can allow you to try new things. Just because you've always helped plan the company softball tournament doesn't mean that you have to keep doing it forever. Saying no

will free up time to pursue other hobbies or interests.

Yes isn't always the best answer. If you're overcommitted and under a lot of stress, you've got a much better chance of becoming sick, tired or just plain crabby, which won't benefit you or anyone else.

It's important to recognize other people. Let those around you come through. Although others may not do things exactly the same way you would, you can learn an important lesson by allowing others to help while gaining yourself valuable free time.

Tips for coping with holiday stress and depression:

Make realistic expectations for the holiday season.

Set realistic goals for yourself.

Pace yourself. Do not take on more responsibilities than you can handle.

Make a list and prioritize the important activities. This can help make holiday tasks more manageable.

Be realistic about what you can and cannot do.

Do not put all your energy into just one day (for example, Thanksgiving Day, New Year's Eve). The holiday cheer can be spread from one holiday event to the next.

Live "in the moment" and enjoy the present.

Look to the future with optimism.

Don't set yourself up for disappointment and sadness by comparing today with the "good old days" of the past.

If you are lonely, try volunteering some of your time to help others.

Find holiday activities that are free, such as looking at holiday decorations, going window shopping without buying, and watching the winter weather, whether it's a snowflake or a raindrop.

Limit your consumption of [alcohol](#), since excessive drinking will only increase your feelings of [depression](#).

Try something new. Celebrate the holidays in a new way.

Spend time with supportive and caring people.

Reach out and make new friends.

Make time to contact a long lost friend or relative and spread some holiday cheer.

Make time for yourself!

Let others share the responsibilities of holiday tasks.

Keep track of your holiday spending. Overspending can lead to depression when the bills arrive after the holidays are over. Extra bills with little budget to pay them can lead to further stress and depression.

Is the environment and reduced daylight a factor in wintertime sadness?

Animals react to the changing season with changes in mood and behavior. People change behaviors, as well, when there is less sunlight. Most people find they eat and [sleep](#) slightly more in wintertime and dislike the dark mornings and short days. For some, however, symptoms are severe enough to disrupt their lives and cause considerable distress. These people are suffering from [seasonal affective disorder](#) (SAD).

Research studies have that found [phototherapy](#) is effective in treating people that suffer from SAD. Phototherapy is a treatment involving a few hours of exposure to intense light. This extra exposure to light while awake seems to correct symptoms of seasonal affective disorder.

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress/MH00030>

<http://www.nmha.org/go/information/get-info/depression/holiday-depression-and-stress>

http://www.medicinenet.com/holiday_depression_and_stress/article.htm

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