

Depression — Jazz-Up the Holiday Blues

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"It's the hap-hap-happiest time of the year... Children are singing and sleigh bells are ringing and..."

Maybe so. But you may wonder why some folks you know, including yourself, may not always feel like singing along. What's wrong?

What's "wrong" may be a condition commonly called the holiday blues.

The first thing to understand about the holiday blues is that anyone, even a child, can be affected. In fact, millions of people experience the holiday blues as they anticipate the tasks of the holiday season, become fatigued by its demanding activities, or engage in bitter-sweet memories of distant holidays.

In some cases, holiday events that are frustrating and disappointing lead to an onset of the blues after the festivities are over.

Be aware, however, that the temporary sadness that comes with the holiday blues is distinctly different from clinical depression which is a "whole body" disorder affecting body, feelings, thoughts and behavior.

Take heart, though, because if you sometimes suffer from passing, depressed moods such as the holiday blues, you can take actions to avoid or lessen the impact of these feelings.

What causes the holiday blues?

The chief cause is stress. Stress is the term given to the many different ways in which your body responds to demands. Stress in itself is neither good nor bad. It's how you react to stress that helps or hurts.

Your actions and attitudes can channel stress into thoughts and behavior that will make you feel good about yourself and help you enjoy the holiday season to the fullest.

The first step in self-help is to recognize the classic holiday stressors and follow these tips. Classic holiday "stressors" include: fatigue, loneliness, unrealistic expectations, and reflections on times past and loved ones who are no longer living.

Fatigue

Some people feel overburdened as they anticipate the hectic schedule, decisions and tasks that lie ahead: what to buy and how to pay for it, when to finish the doll house you promised to put together last Christmas, when to make the crafts needed for the holiday charity bazaar, figuring out which dinner invitations to accept or deciding whether to invite everyone over to your house!

You can feel overwhelmed and exhausted before you start. Worse yet, if you don't act to overcome the stress, you might never become motivated to begin holiday preparations and to find pleasure in the many joys of the season once it arrives.

Tip No. 1. Make exercise part of your daily routine! Studies show that physical activity energizes people, increases their alertness, improves sleep habits and helps people organize their time so they actually get more things done.

Tip No. 2. Eat right and get enough sleep! Good nutrition and good sleep habits can go a long way in helping your body fight off stress. Avoid eating foods high in sugar, fat, salt, and caffeine, and don't take sleeping pills unless absolutely necessary.

Tip No. 3. Don't be shy; ask for help! Plan ahead and divide up the holiday responsibilities. Make lists of what needs to be done and let family members have their pick. For example, if a dinner is scheduled for your house, ask everyone to bring a dish and have some folks arrive early to help with last minute food preparations and table-setting.

Tip No. 4. Cross some things off your holiday "to-do" list! Send holiday cards in July! Let someone else do your house decorations. If you have trouble climbing or reaching, ask a 4-H youth group or a scouting group to decorate your house as an art project!

Tip No. 5. Don't overcommit yourself to volunteer activities! Choose one volunteer activity you really enjoy doing and will have time to do well.

Tip No. 6. Avoid tiring holiday crowds and shopping headaches. Give homemade gifts! For today's busy families, foods that are home-baked or canned fresh from the garden are a rare treat. Hand crafted items, family photo albums, and family histories always make precious keepsakes. Time is one of the most valuable things you can give someone you love — design a gift certificate "redeemable" for three or four hours of free child care or older adult care.

Loneliness

People who are not able to be with family and friends on the holidays may experience a more serious bout of the holiday blues. The holidays often accentuate the loneliness that separated loved ones, divorced, widowed, and single people sometimes feel.

It's easy at times like this to drown in self-pity. You can help defeat these feelings by getting out and being with people. Invite friends over who enjoy the holidays.

Tip No. 7. Take the initiative to create holiday fellowship! Follow the example of Buella Kline, a senior and widow, whose children lived too far to visit her on Christmas. Buella struck on the idea of choosing one day during the holiday season to fill her house with all the people in the community from foreign lands, inviting each of them to bring a dish from their homeland.

Unrealistic expectations

The holiday glow cannot magically warm family relations that have grown cold or resolve family conflicts. Also, family and friends you might have helped during the year might not "repay" your kindness.

Tip No. 8. Avoid unrealistic expectations about what the holidays might bring or how your family and friends might behave! This will decrease the chance of the holiday blues striking after the holidays.

Reflecting on holidays past

The holidays trigger memories that bring hurt or happiness and sometimes both. As in the case of loneliness, reflections on holidays past can be particularly difficult for those who are widowed or divorced or have experienced the loss of someone very close to them. As people grow older, the number of these losses mount and so do the bitter-sweet memories. Clinical depression is not a normal consequence of aging, however, and should never be accepted as such.

Tip No. 9. Realize that it's normal for grief over any loss to reoccur! Permit yourself to experience the sadness that memories can bring by openly talking about the memory with caring persons and by being a good listener for others whom you suspect are suffering this kind of sadness.

Tip No. 10. Sometimes people are reluctant to talk about those who have died or a holiday in the past that was traumatic, but everyone should be encouraged to do so. Try to find the silver lining in each sad memory. For each sad memory raised, ask yourself or the person you are comforting to think of a happy holiday memory, recalling as many details about it as possible.

Tip No. 11. Don't confuse the holidays blues with the clinical depression, including a type known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD). If the holiday blues last more than two weeks and you are experiencing several of the symptoms listed below, it's time to consult a doctor, community mental health center or private counselor.

Having several of these symptoms would indicate a depression far more serious than the holiday blues that should not be ignored. While depression can become a life-threatening disease, it is also the most treatable of all mental illnesses.

So, it's essential to feel confident that you or someone you care about is coping with the holiday blues and not a clinical depression. Then, when you understand what causes the "holiday blues" and put these 10 tips into practice, you're on your way to enjoying the "hap-happiest time of the year!"

It's not always just the blues

If the holiday blues last more than two weeks, and you are experiencing several symptoms listed below, it's time to consult a doctor. Depression is a serious illness, but it is also the most treatable of all mental illnesses.

The warning signs of clinical depression:

- Sleep problems (including very early morning waking or sleeping too much).
- Lack of energy, feeling tired all the time.
- Problems with eating (loss of appetite, weight gain or loss).
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including sex.
- Frequent bouts of crying.
- An "empty" feeling, ongoing sadness and anxiety.
- Aches and pains that just won't go away.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.
- Feelings that the future looks grim; feeling guilty, helpless, or worthless.
- Irritability.
- Thoughts of death or suicide; a suicide attempt.

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