

## AVOIDING THE HOLIDAY BLUES

by

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The six weeks encompassing Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's—typically lumped together as “the holidays”—are universally known for the magic, sentiment, nostalgia, joy, tradition, and good will that all uniquely characterize this time of year.

Just mention the phrase, and thoughts leap to family gatherings, warm fires, office parties, fattening foods, and of course, shopping, eating, and gifts.

A month-and-a-half of eating, drinking, and being merry? How could there ever be room for a real-life Scrooge among us? Unthinkable, you say?

Hardly. For many, the holidays bring on a pain that's not only unthinkable, but downright miserable. Brought on by factors as wide-ranging as the weather, absence or separation of family, stress, unrealistic expectations, hypersentimentality, personal shortcomings, feelings of guilt, overspending, or the death of a loved one, holiday depression—euphemistically labeled the “holiday blues”—can sap the merriment right out of even the most wonderful time of the year (as well as the days immediately following, called post-holiday depression).

Holiday depression is the most common of the various types of depression, and it affects one million people every year. Men and women, young and old all fall victim to feelings of sadness, loneliness, anxiety, guilt, fatigue, and stress that replace the fun, frolic, and festiveness of this emotionally charged season.

Men's Health Network offers the following 10 suggestions to help you identify and ward off—or at least better cope with—potential sources of holiday depression.

**1. Acknowledge, rather than hide, the fact that you're hurting** – Anticipate that others around you may expect certain attitudes and behaviors from you. Still, you may not feel that way. Understand that much of the “holiday hype” is based upon the retail industry's (and media's), overly emotional,

sentimental, nostalgic, and even imaginary notion of what the holidays *should* be like (usually to try to sell you something!). Take away the *shoulds*! Feelings of sadness, loneliness, or depression don't automatically vanish just because it's the holidays. You are not a slave to others' expectations. Regardless of the reason, acknowledge your difficulty at this time, be open and honest with others, refuse to feel guilty, and plan ahead and/or get help if you need it.

**2. Have a plan to deal with your feelings** – You know what to expect, and you feel the hurt coming on. Have a plan to help you fend off or deal with your feelings. As best you can, surround yourself with people who care about and support you—family, friends, or church members. Schedule get-togethers. Read a book. Invest yourself in an exercise program (aerobic activities such as walking, running, cycling, etc., are recommended because of their mood-elevating ability). If necessary, make an appointment with your doctor or therapist. *And learn to say “no.”* It bears repeating: others' expectations can run high at this time of year, but that's no reason for your own mental health to suffer. It's *your* life—you take charge of it.

**3. Set realistic expectations** – Holiday joy has been replaced with holiday stress. The “reason for the season” has succumbed to an endless list of “got-to-do's”. *Perfect planning. Perfect house. Perfect party. Perfect meal. Perfect family. Perfect behavior. Perfect gift. Perfect feelings. Perfect...* whatever! Keeping your expectations realistic rather than perfectionistic will help you set personal boundaries that will keep you from overtaxing yourself. Prioritize—and reduce—self-imposed holiday preparations. Delegate responsibilities. Plan your spending and then stick to your budget. Plan your shopping times well in advance. *Do less and enjoy more.* Obsessing over endless externals—appearance, cleanliness, and logistics—rather than allowing yourself to enjoy meaning, reflection, relationships, peace, and comfort, is bound to change this long-awaited, once-a-year season from a time of exuberance to exhaustion.

**4. Take time for yourself** – Ask yourself the question, *Why is it called holiday depression?* For most people, the likely answer is because these feelings don't occur at any other time of the year. In light of this, take a reflective look at what got you through the previous months, and then make it a point to continue these things during the holidays. Simple things such as getting enough rest, eating and drinking in moderation, exercising regularly, or continuing other favorite activities can maintain a feeling of normalcy, routine, control, and predictability during a time often lacking these things because of time off from work, travel, and changes in environment. There is no need to let self-pressures or others' expectations force you to significantly alter your life. Hey, they're *your* holidays, too; do the things that make *you* feel good!

**5. Consider that your depression may actually be caused by this time of year** – In addition to stress, separation, or self, holiday depression can be related to *season*. Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, can occur when a person experiences reduced exposure to sunlight—which is just what happens during the holiday season when daylight hours are shorter. Check with your doctor to see if *light therapy* might be beneficial in helping you overcome your depression.

**6. Help others** – Experts agree: reaching out to those who are less fortunate helps the helper as well as the helped. Soup kitchens, homeless shelters, nursing homes, churches, and scores of other organizations can always use volunteers, especially at critical times of the year. In addition to providing service to others, you'll benefit from receiving the company of the people around you rather than being alone.

**7. Bury the hatchet—at least until after the holidays** – Family conflicts are a reality of life. And since no perfect families exist throughout the previous ten-and-a-half months of the year, they shouldn't be expected to magically appear during

the holidays. Still, disciplines such as “letting go” and forgiving can go a long way to help heal past wounds. Additionally, family conflicts can be temporarily set aside—even *scheduled*—until after the high-tension holidays in order to facilitate the health, wellbeing, peace, and enjoyment of everyone at this special time.

**8. Start your own traditions** – Sometimes it's necessary to let go of—or at least modify—the past. Sure, family traditions are great. But both families and traditions change with time. (Even ancient traditions had to *start* somewhere!) Despite the generalized portrayals of the holidays, the truth is that everyone celebrates them in ways differing from subtle to significant. So, rather than wallowing in disappointment over the lost “good old days,” accept the fact that some change may be necessary, grasp the season as it is *now*, look forward to the future, and create your own family traditions that can be enjoyed throughout the years and even into future generations.

**9. Keep your alcohol intake low** – Of course, along with the season's eating and being merry comes drinking—especially alcohol. But don't pour gasoline on a fire. Remember, alcohol itself has a depressive effect on your nervous system, so if you're experiencing the holiday blues, drinking too much alcohol will only worsen your depression.

**10. Rededicate yourself to your spirituality** – For what reasons do the holidays even exist if not spiritual? But in today's chaotic, commercialized culture, the “reason for the season” has been swallowed up by maddening materialism that can easily distract us from the rich history, meaning, and significance of the holiday celebrations. Take some time to step back, slow down, and refocus on transcendent, eternal matters. Rededicate yourself to spiritual pursuits, such as church attendance, church work, your prayer life, and other spiritual disciplines. Regain the focus, peace, and comfort originally intended by this time of year.

**SOURCES:**

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