

# What to Do about the Holiday Blues

Not everyone shares in the celebration and joy associated with the holidays. Many people feel stressed and unhappy in response to the demands of shopping for gifts, spending large amounts of money, attending parties and family gatherings, and entertaining houseguests. It is not uncommon to react to these stresses with excessive drinking and eating, difficulty sleeping, and physical complaints. The holiday blues are a common result. If you experience reactions like these during the holidays, you are not alone. Let's take a look at what causes the holiday blues and what you can do about them.

## What Causes the Holiday Blues?

**Fear of disappointing others.** Some people fear disappointing their loved ones during the holidays. Even though they can't afford to spend a lot of money on gifts, some people feel so obligated to come through with a fancy gift that they spend more than they can afford.

**Expecting gifts to improve relationships.** Giving someone a nice present won't necessarily strengthen a friendship or romantic relationship. When your gifts don't produce the reactions you had hoped for, you may feel let down.

**Anniversary reactions.** If someone important to you passed away or left you during a past holiday season, you may become depressed as the anniversary approaches.

**Bad memories.** For some families, the holidays are times of chaos and confusion. This is especially true in families where people have substance abuse problems or dysfunctional ways of relating to each other. If this was true in your family in past years, you may always carry memories of the disappointment and upheaval that came with the holidays. Even though things may be better now, it is difficult to forget the times when your holidays were ruined by substance abuse and family dysfunction.

**It could be SAD.** People who live in northern states may experience depression during the winter because of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD results from fewer hours of sunlight as the days grow shorter during the winter months.

## Strategies for Dealing with the Holiday Blues

While the holiday blues are usually temporary, these ideas can help make this year's holiday experience more pleasant and less stressful.

**Be realistic.** Don't expect the holiday season to solve all past problems. The forced cheerfulness of the holiday season cannot ward off sadness or loneliness.

**Drink less alcohol.** Even though drinking alcohol gives you a temporary feeling of well-being, it is a depressant and never makes anything better.

**Give yourself permission not to feel cheerful.** Accept how you are feeling. If you have recently experienced a loss, you can't expect yourself to put on a happy face. Tell others how you are feeling and what you need.

**Have a spending limit and stick to it.** Look for holiday activities that are free, such as driving around to look at holiday decorations. Go window-shopping without purchasing anything. Look for ways to show people you care without spending a lot.

**Be honest.** Express your feelings to those around you in a constructive, honest, and open way. If you need to confront someone with a problem, begin your sentences with "I feel."

**Look for sources of support.** Learn about offerings at mental health centers, churches, and synagogues. Many of these have special support groups, workshops, and other activities designed to help people deal with the holiday blues.

**Give yourself special care.** Schedule times to relax and pamper yourself. Take a warm bath or spend an evening with a good book.

**Set limits and priorities.** Be realistic about what you will be able to accomplish. Prepare a To-Do list to help you arrange your priorities.

**Volunteer your time.** If you are troubled because you won't be seeing your family, volunteer to work at a hospital or food bank. Volunteering can help raise your spirits by turning your focus to people who are less fortunate than you are.

**Get some exercise.** Exercise has a positive impact on depression because it boosts serotonin levels. Try to get some type of exercise at least twice each week.

## **After the Holidays**

For some people, holiday blues continue into the new year. This is often caused by leftover feelings of disappointment during the holiday season and being physically exhausted. The blues also happen for some people because the start of a new year is a time of reflection, which can produce anxiety.

## **Is It More than Just the Holiday Blues?**

Clinical depression is more than just feeling sad for a few weeks. The symptoms generally include changes in appetite and sleep patterns, having less interest in daily activities, difficulty concentrating, and a general feeling of hopelessness.

Clinical depression requires professional treatment. If you are concerned that a friend or relative may be suffering from more than just holiday blues, you should express your concerns. If the person expresses thoughts of worthlessness or suicide, it is important to seek the help of a qualified mental health professional.