

Preventing the Holiday Blues

Many of us may be more susceptible to the Holiday Blues this year than ever. If you just feel a bit down once the holidays have come and gone, you are not alone. Thousands of people experience bouts of stress and winter depression that linger past the holiday season. Called the Holiday Blues, the condition is typically due to the letdown after all the excitement is over.

This year, however, the Holiday Blues may arrive even before the holidays do. With so many traditional celebrations curtailed or simply canceled due to the pandemic, many of us may not even get to enjoy the normal emotional boost that comes with the holiday season.

Keep in mind that if you feel more depressed than normal for an extended period of time during or, especially, after the holidays, do not be afraid to seek help from a professional. At the very least, reach out to loved ones and friends for support, and learn ways to cope with the blues you are experiencing.

Understanding the Holiday Blues

Whether your blues are of the pre- or post-holiday variety, or both, the symptoms are generally the same:

- Lack of energy
- Lack of interest in pleasurable activities
- Decreased sex drive
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increase in sleep and sleepiness
- Increased appetite or lack of interest in eating
- Social avoidance
- Substance abuse

There are many mental and physiological factors that may be causing these symptoms, including:

Unrealized expectations. It is natural to feel somewhat pressured before and during the holidays: pressure to buy the perfect gifts for others, to expect the perfect gifts for yourself, to keep family and friends entertained and to get in the spirit of the season. You also may feel pressured to make New Year's resolutions that can be difficult to keep. If you do not meet these expectations, you may feel disappointed.

Negative associations with the holidays. Many people do not look forward to the holidays because the season reminds them of something painful. Perhaps your parent, spouse or other loved one passed away recently; the holidays can be an emotional reminder of your loss. Perhaps you dread spending time with certain relatives. These negative feelings often can last beyond the holidays.

Anticlimactic feelings. It is difficult to top the warmhearted emotions we often experience during the holiday season. Once all the festivities have ended, the presents have been exchanged and your holiday time off has passed, it is easy to feel a bit melancholy. It may be a long way off until your next holiday or vacation, and the end-of-the-year holidays are another year away.

Biological reactions to seasonal changes. Research indicates that lack of sunlight, a hallmark of the winter months in many parts of the world, can disrupt brain hormones and circadian rhythms, which control your body's biological clock. Some scientists believe lack of sunlight may cause an imbalance of neurotransmitters, especially serotonin and dopamine, and that some people have reduced retinal light sensitivity in the darker months. People susceptible to these factors may develop seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a form of depression that commonly begins in early fall and subsides in early spring. Over these darker, typically colder months in which there is less sunlight, people with SAD often experience a range of symptoms that may include feelings of depression and lack of energy. SAD may be linked to hormone and biological-clock imbalances. Experts theorize that people with SAD have biological clocks that may run slower in the winter months.

Coping Tips

Try these suggestions to help manage your feelings of depression during and after the holidays:

- **Talk to a professional.** If the blues you are feeling linger for several weeks and are interfering with your ability to enjoy life and function effectively, seek help. A therapist can assist you in exploring your feelings.
- **Find support in others.** Try confiding in trusted family members and friends about how you have been feeling. Be honest with others about what you are experiencing instead of covering up your emotions. An understanding loved one can give you the strength and support you need to help cope with depressive feelings.
- **Manage your stress.** Learn effective ways to reduce your stress and anxiety, which may minimize your feelings of depression.
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular fitness activities can improve your mood and boost your self-esteem. Talk to your doctor about an exercise program that is right for you. Because a lack of sunlight may be contributing to your depression, exercise outdoors for a double benefit.
- **Eat right.** Discipline yourself not to overeat. Avoid junk foods and environments that may encourage bingeing. Stick to a nutritionally balanced diet. Avoid alcohol, which is a depressant.
- **Get the proper amount of sleep.** Experts recommend at least seven to eight hours a night. Resist the urge to oversleep, and try to maintain a regular sleeping schedule.
- **Make more time for recreational, fun activities.** Try to spend more time outdoors, especially on sunny days.
- **Be more social.** Stay in touch with friends and family.
- **Consider using a light box.** These devices have been used successfully to treat SAD. Talk with your doctor or therapist about whether the increased amount of light could be helpful to you.
- **Educate yourself.** Learn all you can about depression, support groups in your area and ways to manage your feelings.

Do not let feelings of depression and sadness control your life. Get help to manage your symptoms. Learn to feel comfortable talking about your difficult emotions. Take care of your mind and body by giving it the food, rest and activity it needs. Do not be afraid to treat yourself to the things you enjoy more often. Aim to get out of the funk you may be feeling and to experience life to the fullest.

Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Institutes of Health (NIH): <http://health.nih.gov>
- Mental Health America: www.nmha.org