

Stress, depression and the holidays: Tips for coping

Written by the Mayo Clinic staff for www.mayoclinic.org

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of demands — parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few.

But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
2. **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.
3. **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.
4. **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.
5. **Stick to a budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts.

Try these alternatives:

- o Donate to a charity in someone's name.
- o Give homemade gifts.
- o Start a family gift exchange.

6. **Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.
7. **Learn to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.



8. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt.

Try these suggestions:

- Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Incorporate regular physical activity into each day.

9. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.

Some options may include:

- Taking a walk at night and stargazing.
- Listening to soothing music.
- Getting a massage.
- Reading a book.

10. **Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Take control of the holidays

Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.

The Psychology of the 'Holiday Blues'

David Heitz, writing for healthline.com

There are many reasons people feel depressed during the holidays, and another round of eggnog probably won't help.

Not all of us find ourselves tapping our toes along with "Jingle Bells" during the holidays. For some, days meant to be jolly are about as much fun as sour eggnog.



The "holiday blues" is sadness, anxiety, and sometimes depression that manifests during the holiday season. For some people, it inevitably comes along with each winter's gloom.

For example, someone who lost a best friend on Christmas Eve 20 years ago may not feel like going caroling this year either.

“That's when we have these particular illnesses, deaths, or trauma,” said Sam Moreno, a psychologist at the Robert Young Center for Community Mental Health in Moline, Ill. “The holidays trigger some kind of past unpleasantness, and it permeates them.”

Others prefer not to be reminded of their family's dysfunction and loathe annual get-togethers.

“Many people have had unpleasant situations throughout the holidays via a function of families and personalities,” Moreno told Healthline. “They look at the holidays, and they're not what we see on TV or the movies.”

Plus, burning the candle at both ends takes a toll. Leading up to the holidays, we work extra hard to prepare for time off, while at the same time cooking, shopping, and planning parties. “Afterward, some people are just down,” Moreno said. “You need to rest, sleep, and take care of yourself.”

On the flip side, going back to everyday life after the holidays sometimes seems bland and depressing. “I usually say to people who tell me they like the holidays, 'That's great. But what are you going to do in January? And February?'” Moreno said.

Lastly, if you feel despondent regularly during the dark winter months you may have seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. While little is known about SAD, researchers at Yale University hope to find some answers soon. Experts theorize that this type of seasonal depression may be triggered by a lack of UV light from the sun, and some recommend spending time beneath a UV lamp.

People with SAD often crave sugar, overeat, and generally become lethargic and withdrawn. Symptoms may begin as early as September and last until April. More than 11 million Americans suffer from SAD, and research shows women may be four times as likely to have SAD symptoms as men.

Banishing the Holiday Doldrums

It's very important to maintain realistic expectations, Moreno said. “We can be mostly responsible for our own efforts, but we can't predict the outcomes. A person has to remember, 'I've got to be happy with myself for cooking this because I'm doing my best, but I realize some people might not like it or come to my party.'”

Besides UV light therapy, another approach to treating SAD involves teaching someone how to change the way he or she thinks about and reacts to wintertime sadness. This is known as cognitive-behavioral therapy, and clinical trials are currently under way at the University of Vermont to measure how well it works for people with SAD.

If symptoms persist for more than a couple of weeks or sadness begins to affect your work or home life, it's a good idea to be evaluated for depression by a mental health professional.