

In Good Health

10 Tips for Overcoming the Dreaded Holiday Blues

The holidays aren't always joyous for everyone. High expectations, money woes, and family conflict can cause trouble for anyone, but especially those prone to depression. With a bit of planning, the holidays can leave you feeling up, not down. Follow these tips for a successful holiday.

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Plan ahead: Spend some time figuring out how to take care of yourself during this time. Come up with activities to take care of YOU! Read a book, take a nap, spend time with a friend, and schedule ahead by writing them on a calendar. In between shopping, baking, and family time, make sure YOU don't fall by the wayside.

Avoid family conflict: There are a couple ways to save your sanity at family gatherings. If you know there are going to be conflicts, prepare a neutral response, such as, "let's talk about that another time," or, "I can see how you would feel that way." Then escape to the restroom, offer to help in the kitchen, or go hang out with the kids.

Forget perfection: There is not one, perfect gift, so don't stress yourself out trying to find it! Try listing the simple things that really make your family happy, and begin traditions that help the less fortunate. When you take your eyes off of yourself and focus on those who have far less than you do, it's difficult to be depressed.

Learn to grieve: If you are mourning a loved one, it's a good time to talk about your feelings or reach out to support groups. There's no one right way to feel. It's not uncommon to feel angry at the person for leaving you alone or to feel guilty if you do enjoy yourself during the holidays. All feelings are a sign that you're human and reflect where you are in your healing process.

Schedule some sleep: Holiday activities can easily interfere with your sleep schedule. But studies have shown there is a link between sleep loss and depression, so you need to be extra careful about cutting back on sleep to get everything done. Try to get to bed and wake up at approximately the same time every day; avoid large meals and physical activity, such as dancing, within a few hours of bedtime; and make your bedroom very comfortable and relaxing.

Prioritize workouts: Exercise is one of the first activities to get lost in the holiday season. It should be placed high on your to-do list. The more stress we are under, the less time we feel like we have, and the more irritated our mood, the more we need to continue exercising. Exercise has been shown to improve mood. Taking a brisk walk for 35 minutes five days a week (or 60 minutes three times a week) can do the trick.

Consider your light exposure: If you are consistently tired, irritable, and down at this time of year, it may not be due to the holidays as much as to the lack of exposure to the sun. Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, can be treated by long walks during daylight hours or exposure to a light box for about 30 minutes a day. If you think you may be suffering from SAD, talk to your doctor about treatment options.

Focus on what matters: The holidays shouldn't be all about the presents, but financial woes can make it easy to lose sight of that. Control the stress (and cost) by organizing a gift exchange with friends or family. You can also bake your gifts, or create traditions such as having a large potluck meal. Learn to say NO.

Don't binge on food or alcohol: For some, overindulgence is as much of a holiday tradition as opening gifts. Have one piece of pie, not three. Apart from being unhealthy for your body, that level of indulgence can make you will feel guilty afterward. Prepare for holiday dinners by eating healthy meals the week prior. And don't use alcohol to deal with holiday depression. Alcohol can intensify your emotions and leave you feeling worse when it wears off.

Cut back on commitments: If you feel like you just can't get through one more holiday gathering, it's OK to sit them out. One of the things about holiday stress we forget is that Thanksgiving and Christmas are both 24 hours and that's it. Figure out what you need to do to get through those 24 hours, such as volunteering, going on vacation, visiting a shelter, or helping someone who is alone. Focusing on others can help alleviate depression.