

Combatting the “Holiday Blues”



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HEALTH - We all know the stereotype of the “perfect” winter holiday season—family coming together from across the country, extravagant gifts, huge meals with everyone around the table, decorations, parties, social gatherings, and of course the requisite perfect winter weather. However, life is a lot more complicated than a Hallmark holiday movie (for starters, how DOES the hair of those Hallmark movie heroines always stay so perfect in the snow?).

The truth is, for many people the holidays can be a trigger for feelings of grief, loneliness, stress, and fatigue. As the National Alliance on Mental Illness [found](#), 64% of those with a mental illness say the holidays exacerbated their symptoms, while three out five Americans report that their mental health is negatively impacted by the holidays. It’s important to remember that what might be the “most wonderful time of the year” for some is the toughest time of year for others—and that if you do feel this way, you are not alone.

Signs and symptoms of the “holiday blues” can take many forms. They may include a change in eating or sleeping habits, loss of interest in daily activities and self-care, or having negative thoughts about yourself. While these feelings are not uncommon, they aren’t something you should suffer through alone. Here are a few tips that may help lessen the complicated feelings associated with the holiday season.

Accept your feelings

Real life is not a picture-perfect holiday card, and that’s okay! End-of-year holidays can often cause people to focus on negative moments from the past year, making this a particularly tough period. Some people may also feel more isolated or lonely during this time, perhaps because they’re more homebound due to illness or mobility issues, or they had a loved one who recently passed away.

Feelings of sadness or “not belonging” often accompany big life changes, but there is no need to be ashamed or isolate yourself further because of these feelings. Some older adults may not speak up about what they’re going through because they don’t want to be a “burden.” Sharing with others the reality that you are feeling low is a tough but brave choice, and it can help place you on the road to feeling better. If it is your loved one who is behaving different, on the other hand, and you think they may need help, your instincts are probably right. Reach out to them and encourage them to seek help and connect with community resources.

Manage expectations

As we age, things invariably change, and it can be challenging to accept that things we once loved and enjoyed doing have become more difficult or even impossible. For example, a decline in physical or mental ability may make holiday events stressful or difficult to celebrate. It is important to be mindful of what’s actually possible for you or a loved one to do during the holidays and build your plans around that—rather than strive for an unreachable ideal.

Practice self-care

It’s important to give yourself a break and be as kind to yourself as possible during the holidays. Pay special attention to your eating, sleeping and downtime, and make a strategy for potentially stressful times. Keep in mind that you can pick and choose what you can or want to do. You can always say “no” to that request to bake five dozen cookies or go to three parties in one week, especially if you know it would cause you additional stress. Activities with others can be simple and enjoyable, like taking a short walk with someone, or watching your favorite movie, or eating a special comfort food. Try to avoid the pressure of constantly doing what others choose to do, and instead focus on self-care and your own well-being. For example, rather than planning a five-course meal, a simple pizza shared with a friend around a table can be just as meaningful.

Nobody is perfect!

Don’t let the idea of “perfection” stop you from having a fun time at the holidays. While having a plan for managing stress is important, pre-planning every detail of a holiday gathering or event can be an added stressor in of itself. Sometimes, the best plan is no plan. Focus instead on simple and actionable ways you can maintain your well-being. One way is to make sure you spend time with supportive and caring people, who will be understanding if you are not feeling your best self. Remember, too, that humor is one of our best tools against stress... but sometimes we forget to use it and can get a bit rusty!

Make new traditions

While the way we celebrate the holidays may have changed over the years, there is no reason not to honor old traditions and start new ones. Share old family photos and stories with a new friend, schedule a video call with family to reminisce over past holiday times together, or catch up with an old friend you haven’t spoken to in a long time. You can even get creative with this approach—try a new recipe or craft that becomes your go-to next year!

Look towards the future

It is important to remember that we all deserve credit for getting through several years that have been tough for many of us. The holidays don't last forever, and you can (and should) look ahead and make future plans, while cherishing treasured memories from holidays past.

Short-term mental health issues like the holiday blues are different from mental illness, but they should be taken seriously as they can lead to clinical anxiety and depression, and even spur cognitive decline. If you are having severe symptoms, be sure to tell your doctor or seek professional help by calling **988**, the nationwide number for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which will connect you with a mental health professional. For those interested in behavioral health resources and services from VNS Health, visit vnshealth.org or call 1-866-986-7691.

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