

## Holiday Depression and Stress

The holiday season is a time full of joy, cheer, parties, and family gatherings. However, for many people, it is a time of self-evaluation, loneliness, reflection on past failures, and anxiety about an uncertain future.

### What Causes Holiday Blues?

Many factors can cause the "holiday blues": stress, fatigue, unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, financial constraints, and the inability to be with one's family and friends. The demands of shopping, parties, family reunions, and house guests also contribute to feelings of tension. People who do not become depressed may develop other stress responses, such as: headaches, excessive drinking, over-eating, and difficulty sleeping. Even more people experience post-holiday let down after January 1. This can result from disappointments during the preceding months compounded with the excess fatigue and stress.

### Coping with Stress and Depression During the Holidays

- Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable. Try to set realistic goals for yourself. Pace yourself. Organize your time. Make a list and prioritize the important activities. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Do not put entire focus on just one day (i.e., Thanksgiving Day) remember it is a season of holiday sentiment and activities can be spread out (time-wise) to lessen stress and increase enjoyment.
- Remember the holiday season does not banish reasons for feeling sad or lonely; there is room for these feelings to be present, even if the person chooses not to express them.
- Leave "yesteryear" in the past and look toward the future. Life brings changes. Each season is different and can be enjoyed in its own way. Don't set yourself up in comparing today with the "good ol' days."
- Do something for someone else. Try volunteering some time to help others.
- Enjoy activities that are free, such as driving around to look at holiday decorations; going window shopping without buying; making a snowperson with children.
- Be aware that excessive drinking will only increase your feelings of depression.
- Try something new. Celebrate the holidays in a new way.
- Spend time with supportive and caring people. Reach out and make new friends or contact someone you have not heard from for awhile.
- Save time for yourself! Recharge your batteries! Let others share responsibility of activities.

### Can Environment be a Factor?

Recent studies show that some people suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) which results from fewer hours of sunlight as the days grow shorter during the winter months. Phototherapy, a treatment involving a few hours of exposure to intense light, is effective in relieving depressive symptoms in patients with SAD.

Other studies on the benefits of phototherapy found that exposure to early morning sunlight was effective in relieving seasonal depression. Recent findings, however, suggest that patients respond equally well to phototherapy whether it is scheduled in the early afternoon. This has practical applications for antidepressant treatment since it allows the use of phototherapy in the workplace as well as the home.

### Signs to Seek Help

Though some people may experience "holiday blues" that pass with the season, others will have profound feelings of sadness or depression that do not go away over time. Symptoms of depression include:

- Sleeping too much or too little, middle-of-the night or early morning wakings
- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Reduced appetite and weight loss or increased appetite and weight gain
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities, including sex
- Irritability or restlessness
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Feeling inappropriate guilt, hopelessness or worthlessness

If you are experiencing these symptoms over a period of several weeks, you may be depressed. Talking with a mental health professional or taking a mental health-screening test can help you understand how well you are coping with recent events. Seek help.

**For More Information:**

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to [www.mhacolorado.org](http://www.mhacolorado.org).