

# An Ounce of Prevention

Complimentary

December 2017

Issue 252

Printed by:

Gary J. Meiers, Ph. D., Jo Ann Hammond, Ph. D.,  
& Associates, Ltd.

10009 – 85 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T6E 2J9



Website: drsgaryjoanmeierspsychologists.ca

Phone: (780) 433-2269

Fax: (780) 431-0463

E-Mail: psychrec@telusplanet.net

## Holiday Stress: A Resourceful Survivor's Guide

*Here's your chance to enjoy a serene Christmas—or Ramadan or Kwanzaa or Hanukkah*

The holidays are supposed to be joyous occasions marked by meaningful traditions, family connections, spiritual rejuvenation and just plain fun. Instead, for many people, they're hectic times filled with stress, depression and shiny new possessions that won't be paid off until March.

"It's no small feat to try to fit a whole year's worth of passion and generosity into a couple of days," says Mariana Caplan, M.A., a counselor from Fairfax, California. Add family conflicts, time constraints and budget concerns, and you've got a recipe for temporary insanity.

### Jingle-jangled nerves

There are plenty of signs that Scroogitis is epidemic. Consider the emergence of holiday stress management workshops and books. "I don't know that many people who look forward to the holidays for any reason other than having time off from work," says Caplan, author of *When Holidays Are Hell...! A Guide to Surviving Family Gatherings* (Hohm Press). "Holidays are all about rituals, and rituals are meant to create meaning for people. Nowadays, though, holidays often revolve around obligations, expectations, and meaningless going through the motions." It's no wonder that people often end up feeling tired and disappointed rather than renewed.

An October 2000 survey on this issue was conducted for Xylo, a company that sets up private Web-based networks to meet the lifestyle needs of corporate employees. In a national random sample of 625 employed adults, the most often cited sources of holiday stress or anxiety were shopping, lack of time and expense. Despite the stereotype that most of the burden falls on women, the survey found that the sexes reported feeling nearly equal amounts of pressure. For example, 25% of women named gift shopping as their top stressor, compared to 20% of men.

But how bad can it get? A 1999 study, published in the American Heart Association journal *Circulation*, found a sharp increase in the number of cardiac deaths starting around Thanksgiving and rising steadily until around New Year's Day, when the number dropped off again. Previous researchers have found similar trends, which they sometimes attributed to cold weather. However, the death records analyzed for this study came from sunny Southern California. Robert Kloner, MD, PhD, lead author of the study, thinks it's very possible that the holidays may play a role. "Not only are many people under more stress, but they also may overindulge. They tend to eat more food, drink more alcohol and take in more salt this time of year" Says Kloner.

It doesn't have to be that way, though. Below, several experts offer advice on finding a remedy for the "bah, humbug!" bug.

### The gift of sanity

It may be better to give than to receive, but it's easy to forget that sentiment when you've just spent three hours braving the mob at your local mall. "Gifts are actually meant to be symbols of love," says Caplan. In a consumer-oriented society, however, this sweet idea is easily perverted into the stress of excess. Says Caplan, "People spend an enormous amount of time and energy roaming the stores or flipping through catalogs in a desperate attempt to demonstrate love to their families." They also spend a vast amount of money, which often means starting the new year in debt.

The irony is that fancy, expensive gifts may mean more to the giver than to the receiver. This is most apparent with children. "One or two gifts that don't even have to cost much will totally satisfy them," says Caplan. "When you overwhelm children with too many gifts, they get caught up in the materialistic frenzy of the adults, tearing the gifts open, then tossing them aside. Fifty gifts may not be as satisfying to them as a set of cookie cutters for making cookies in the afternoon."

In contrast to costly trinkets, young and old alike almost always appreciate gifts of time and attention. "You might give your child an IOU for pitching a baseball or playing at the park, or your spouse an IOU for a back rub," says Dorothea Lack, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist from San Francisco who runs groups to help people cope with holiday blues. Handmade gifts also show how much you care, and making them is an effective stress reliever for many people.

## Not-so-great expectations

Bloated gift lists are just a symptom of the larger ailment of overblown holiday expectations. "Some people think they have to create a fantasy situation that is unattainable by anyone," says Lack. "When their life can't live up to the fantasy, they may feel disappointment and sometimes depression."

Lack says unrealistic sugarplum fantasies usually have their roots in childhood. Some people who feel they missed out on holiday fun as children—for example, because their family was too poor to buy many gifts or because a parent was alcoholic or absent—may go overboard trying to make up for it as adults. At the other extreme, some people who come from an affluent family may feel inadequate when they can't give their children the same kind of lavish holidays they had.

### Create traditions that suit your family

The solution, says Lack, is simple: "Keep your expectations grounded in reality." Give up your fantasy of a Norman Rockwell scene around the table or a commercial wonderland under the tree. "Instead, put some effort into creating new traditions that suit your real-life family and budget," says Lack. "Sit down and think about what would please your family as a unit." For example, you might want to all go ice-skating or watch a favorite movie together. Whatever you do, keep the focus on people rather than things, and realize that not everything has to be perfect.

Allow enough time for rest and relaxation, too. "Many people overextend themselves trying to prepare for something wonderful, to the point where they deprive themselves of normal self-care," says Lack. As a result, they get tired and run down, making it nearly impossible for them to actually enjoy the big day. When people feel harried, they also are more likely to eat too much rich food and drink too much alcohol in an effort to give themselves an artificial boost. Unfortunately, the result of this misguided strategy is that they just wind up feeling worse.

### Away for the holidays: a radical suggestion

For many people, the prospect of going home for the holidays ranks high on their seasonal stress list. "A lot of family visits take place out of habit and a sense of obligation," says Caplan. "However, when everybody is acting based on shoulds and obligation, nobody finds much deep satisfaction."

Caplan's radical suggestion: Ask yourself whether you really want to go home this year. "If it works to go home, by all means do so, but sometimes you're better off not going. Lots of mature people who love their families very much still decide to skip the trip."

Breaking the news to family members takes some tact, however. "If you try to explain that you're not going home because the family neurosis is going to set you back years in therapy, they probably will misunderstand and feel hurt and upset," says Caplan. "It's fine to tell them that you can't take off work, have other plans, or can't afford the trip." It may help to set an alternate date for a visit at a less stressful time. If you do, though, be sure to follow through on your promise.

Caplan stresses that it's perfectly okay to skip a family visit just because you want to. However, if you still need to justify the decision in your own mind, she says these are some good reasons to not go home for the hell-idays:

- if you or your chosen lifestyle will be the main course at the meal
- if you have emotionally or physically abusive relatives
- if you can't leave the past behind to enjoy the present
- if you are motivated to visit purely out of guilt
- if you really can't afford the trip
- if it will take you more than three days to recover from the visit.

### Ho-ho-home, sweet home

Of course, many folks still opt to spend the holidays with family, neuroses and all. If you fall into this group, the most important thing you can bring to the celebration is not a gaily wrapped package or a molded salad, but a big reservoir of good cheer.

"This is not the time to work out the last decade's worth of pain," says Tian Dayton, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the Caron Foundation, an addiction treatment center, in New York City. Even if you arrive relaxed and calm, chances are some of your relatives are under-rested and overstressed. As a result, says Dayton, "it's too volatile a situation to try to air something that is bothering you. Save it for January."

That's easier to say than do, however. In many families, the holidays are marred by the same arguments and conflicts year after year. If that's the case in your family, Dayton recommends that you take a hard look at the role you're playing in the family dynamic. "Make a list with two columns," she says. "Put the pros of the role you play in one column and the cons in the other column. Then figure out how you can maximize the advantages while minimizing the disadvantages."

As an example, consider the youngest sibling in a family. Even though she's an adult now, people still treat her like the baby when she goes home. The advantages are that she gets lots of attention and affection, and other family members don't expect her to help out as much as everybody else. The disadvantages are that she feels as if no one will ever let her grow up or take her seriously.

In this situation, Dayton says, "The person might want to take a more proactive approach to being helpful—maybe offer to bring a dish or decoration. She also might want to invite a friend who treats her as a grown-up, which can alter the family dynamic." In addition, she can watch her own behavior for signs that she is slipping back into the familiar, but now inappropriate, childhood role. Then she can substitute more appropriate behavior.

### The less-than-perfect family

Of course, you are only one chapter in your family story. Many people have at least one relative who always seems to get belligerent or drunk at family gatherings. You can plot ahead with other relatives to try to steer Uncle Bob away from dangerous topics of conversation or Aunt Marge away from the booze. However, there is only so much you can do. "If somebody is out of control or drunk, they're in an irrational state," says Dayton. "It's pointless to try to reason with them then."

If you anticipate that things may get tense despite your best efforts, plan an escape route, says Dayton. "Don't overexpose yourself to the situation. Bring your own car so you can leave when you're ready. If you're visiting from out of town, consider staying in a motel, so you have your own safe space to retreat to."

### Home alone?

For some people, the problem with the holidays is not family, but the lack thereof. Loneliness seems to be particularly oppressive at this time of year. Find something to do, says Dayton, whether it is volunteering at a homeless shelter or taking a vacation. If you stay home, think of other people you know who may be in the same boat. Then invite them over for dinner or another activity, such as watching a parade. And if someone else extends a welcome invitation, "By all means, accept it graciously," adds Dayton. "Don't be shy about participating in another family's rituals."

### Holiday grief

'Tis the season to be jolly, but not for everyone. Those who have recently lost a loved one often find that grief is felt particularly acutely during the holidays. If this is the first Thanksgiving or Hanukkah or Christmas since the person's death, it may be especially tough, says John Welshons, M.A., a grief counselor from Little Falls, New Jersey, and author of *Awakening From Grief: Finding the Road Back to Joy*.

"The key to coping with grief is to not pretend that things are the same as they used to be. Try to bring some honesty to this difficult situation." Every family needs to find their own way of doing this, however. For some, the best approach may be to restructure the holiday experience, by doing something different or traveling someplace new. For others, though, the opposite approach feels right.

Welshons says some families even put a photograph of the deceased in his or her chair at the table—"Not as a way of clinging to the past, but as a way of recognizing the change in the family in the present." Other ways of memorializing the deceased include putting up his or her favorite ornament or visiting the grave. Says Welshons, "Such gestures may help people find a new way to connect in their hearts with the loved one now that he or she is no longer with them physically."

Whatever approach is taken, Welshons says that family members need to accept that some sadness is probably inevitable and talk about what they're going through. "Trying to create a false atmosphere of fun and frivolity just creates a sense of unreality that adds to the stress." When family members are struggling with their own grief, they may not always be open to an honest sharing of emotion. In such cases, a friend, counselor, or support group can provide a sympathetic ear and much-needed emotional support.

~ by Sherrie McGregor, Ph.D.

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/holiday-stress-a-resourceful-survivors-guide/?all=1>

## Five Ways to Make the Holidays Less Blue

The holiday season can be a stressful time of year for everyone — but they don't have to be. In a previous article, "Five Ways to Beat Holiday Stress," I offered some suggestions on ways to avoid some of the pitfalls that come along with the holidays.

It turns out five suggestions wasn't enough, so here are five more ways to help avoid the holiday blues.

### 1. It's Okay to Be Alone

Not everyone has a big family or a plethora of friends to celebrate the holidays with. Due to various schedules or location, it may be impractical to get together over the holidays.

Of course, there is no reason you have to spend the holiday season with anyone at all. It's perfectly acceptable to stay in and celebrate by yourself. Watch a movie, read a book, take a long bath, and take time to reflect. Some folks will buy themselves gifts or go on vacation.

Remember, it's okay to be alone, so make the holidays your own!

### 2. Make a Holiday Plan

This time of year, the holidays follow one after the other and it is easy for someone to become stressed from last-minute preparations. Planning can greatly reduce the pressure and slow down the typically speed-driven holidays. Rather than frantically putting together last-minute festivities, do as much as you can ahead of time. The more you can complete before the holidays hit "fully jolly," the more time you'll have available to really enjoy the holidays.

### 3. Don't Be Afraid to Seek Professional Help

If the holiday blues are constant and you think there may be bigger issues at play, you should seek the help of a therapist or other mental health professional. Sometimes, the holidays are when we feel the most alone; scheduling an appointment can help tremendously during this time.

### 4. Don't Listen to the Media

The media can play an important role in how we view the holidays. Pop culture loves to emphasize images that include large families lovingly gathered around a fire, feast, or other holiday festivity. Don't compare real life with the "picture-perfect" versions of the holiday season.

Doing so can greatly increase our feelings of isolation, while decreasing our self-esteem. Remember, media portrayals of everything are designed to impress; they are not reality.

*Finally, please remember. . .*

### 5. It's Okay Not to Like the Holidays

Sometimes, we simply do not like something and that's okay! We are allowed to not like a specific holiday or the entire holiday season and it doesn't mean anything is wrong with you.

If you dislike the holidays, you are not alone in your opinion. Many people cringe at the thought of holiday festivities. For some, the holidays are simply too loud, too busy, too expensive, and too obsessed over by others. No one can make you enjoy the holidays, just as no one can make my niece, Nikki, eat her vegetables.

Do keep in mind, however, that if the holidays are not your cup of tea, it's not a sentiment you need to share. Spreading negativity does no good for either party and only adds unhappiness. Some people dislike this time of year, and other people (like me) love it. No one should be made to feel "less than" for their opinion.

~By Gabe Howard

<https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2017/11/20/five-ways-to-make-the-holidays-less-blue/>

Merry Hanukkah  
Happy Christmas



### Parenting Corner:

#### How to Raise Emotionally Healthy Children

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/how-to-raise-emotionally-healthy-children/>

#### The Whole Brain Child - Animated

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vBEI79\\_oQE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vBEI79_oQE)

\*\*Copies of *The Whole Brain Child* available in the office

### Self- Help Corner:

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| Alcoholics Anonymous:  | 780-424-5900 |
| <a href="http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org">www.alcoholics-anonymous.org</a> |              |
| Al-Anon/Alateen:   | 780-433-1818 |
| Support Network / Referral Line:   | 211          |
| Distress Line:   | 780-482-4357 |
| Cocaine Anonymous:   | 780-425-2715 |