

HOLIDAY BLUES

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We're all subject to overly high expectations for the holidays, fostered by advertisements, the media, songs, etc. Images of healthy, wealthy families baking cookies, trimming trees, singing carols, opening gifts and enjoying dinner together cause us to feel that our experiences should be just like those of the "ideal" family. When our experiences don't live up to the ideal, we may feel disappointed, upset or worse, contributing to holiday stress and depression.

Part of taking control of your holiday experience this year is to acknowledge that we are all culturally bombarded from every direction with such idealized images of the perfect holiday. Adults and children alike are subjected to the commercialized messages that distort the holiday truth. The real meaning of Christmas, for example, is a spiritual message of hope for mankind. Too often, this message is cut and lost on the editor's floor.

Real life doesn't suddenly change due to a calendar date. If you've struggled with a dysfunctional family for many years, the holidays won't cause family members to suddenly behave themselves on Christmas Eve. In short, keeping your finger on the pulse of reality is a good beginning strategy for successfully coping with potential holiday blues.

In many families, children's expectations start to rise with the first holiday catalogs that arrive in September. "Wish lists" are begun and soon, parents are making more purchases than their budget can afford as they fall victim to our culture's materialistic message that expensive gifts are a sign of love and caring. Avoid this trap by discussing your financial situation as a family and developing a holiday budget that is based on realistic expectations of what you can afford.

As a family, also explore realistic expectations about the sheer amount of things you will have time to do this holiday. There will be demands to bake for a school holiday party, attend a party at a boss's house, mail out holiday cards, wrap gifts, donate time to a soup kitchen, go caroling with a church group, etc. Effective time management is about planning ahead and getting the entire family on the same page. Also discuss the need to say "no" to some upcoming requests. Eliminate hassle by sending gifts from mail order catalogues rather than wrapping and mailing yourself. If you don't enjoy baking, realize cookies don't have to be "homemade." Don't push yourself to the point where you and your family are too exhausted to enjoy the holidays, and the only thing you feel when they are over is relief.

In addition to messages from the outside world, we are also stimulated by our own internal memories during the holidays. Understand there is a difference between holiday blues and holiday stress. Holiday blues are feelings of loss or sadness because you can't be with people who are special to you. Holiday stress is often caused because you believe you need to be with some of those people. Naturally, significant others are remembered during holidays. Hence, unresolved issues are likely to be triggered from our past such as past losses of loved ones and unresolved grief. Other types of losses are also likely to occur, such as the loss of meaning and purpose, the loss of health, material things, status, as well as anticipated future losses, to list a few.

If your holiday blues are stemming from past losses, take advantage of the time off from work to help you complete your mourning and finish your grieving over the loss. You will likely need to feel the sadness and grief, and be intellectually clear with yourself as to what you lost and the magnitude of the loss. By accepting the loss and the feelings that accompany it, the intensity of the bad feelings will lessen. To complete the grieving process, one has to find other ways of getting his/her needs met that were previously met by the person who is deceased. Once completed, you will be able to experience good feelings when you reminisce. You might have a twinge of sadness at times, but the agonizing pain will be relieved. And most of all, remember that drowning your troubles in eggnog or pigging out on holiday sweets is not the solution to easing any type of emotional pain.

If you anticipate being lonely this holiday, show up where people are. Volunteer to help prepare and serve food at local soup kitchen, wrap gifts for needy children or visit a nursing home. Statistics show that many elderly people are often forgotten during the holidays. Your visit will always be appreciated. Joyce Faith once said, "The mystery of being a volunteer is that lonely hearts feel useful, fearful hearts discover it isn't so scary to encounter another person, cynical hearts learn to be hopeful and isolated hearts are warmed by community."

There is no cure-all for the holiday blues, however it is important for you to understand that the only person in charge of how you "feel" is you. If you are feeling lost for direction this holiday, there is a powerful approach to be found in the first verse of the *Serenity Prayer* which reads, "God grant me the serenity to (1) accept the things I can not change, (2) the courage to change the things I can, and (3) the wisdom to know the difference. Consider applying these three principles and serenity can replace the holiday blues.

And finally, practice gratitude! Be thankful for all the things you DO have and avoid focusing on what you lack. Count your blessings! Make a list! When you really look, you can find many positive things to focus on. "Pity Parties" are out this holiday.