



Beat the holiday blues

December is generally considered a joyous time of year. Celebrating the holidays during this month conjures up thoughts of families and loved ones joining together. Rarely are the holidays associated with sadness and depression. Yet for many, this time of year is just that.

Holidays a mixed blessing

Holiday activities are a mixed blessing for many people. The holiday reality often does not match the popularized image, and the pace of activities can be accelerated.

Some people are alone at the holiday season and feel neglected and unwanted. People who are alone or feel alone often suffer with the holiday blues. Indeed, the holiday season can cause depression, especially for single people, for someone with a recent death in the family or a recent divorce, and for homeless individuals. The joy can be squeezed out of the season as the holiday budget shrinks. People get behind in their shopping, stores resemble stockrooms, and people have to fight crowds and traffic. The pace of activity can hamper enjoyment and energy.

Too much pressure

The holiday season is more pressure on a pressured life. Women especially tend to take on the responsibility of assuring the happiness of family members by attempting to recreate idealized "perfect" holidays of the past. The results are most often disappointing. Added seasonal responsibilities cause a loss of resilience, humor and balance. Unrealistic expectations lead to shattered expectations. Thinking of the holidays as large family gatherings with gifts and food on the table is often not realistic. The contrast for single people, one-parent families and the poor can be striking. Money is a major cause of stress. There may not be enough money to buy the one gift a child has wanted all year. Then parental guilt and self-blame begin. Or parents may argue about the amount of money spent on holiday gift giving. Images of the holidays often do not measure up to reality.

Although holiday blues are common, many people suppress them because they feel ashamed of their feelings.

The holiday slump usually starts out as a low-grade depression. A little help can stop the blues from developing into a severe depression.

Though the holiday season can bring disappointments and depression, setting limits, developing realistic expectations and creating new traditions are the keys to beating the holiday blues.

How to avoid the holiday blues

Here are some ways to prevent being caught in the holiday blues trap:

- Create a family of friends and establish new traditions.
- Call someone who may be lonely. Often lonely people are too shy to call others but are glad when someone calls them.
- Remember both the good and bad of former holidays to develop a balanced viewpoint.
- Reduce the number of have-to-dos such as shopping, baking, decorating and correspondence.
- Set budget limits on holiday gift giving.
- Don't let the core of self-worth be dependent on gift giving and receiving.
- Remember that gift giving to impress rarely comes from the heart.
- Give gifts, time and creativity in proportion to ability.
- Invite other people to celebrate the season with you.
- Be gracious when accepting gifts.
- Avoid the extreme build-up of anticipation and nearly inevitable letdown.
- Be aware of personal limitations.
- Simplify seasonal observations.
- Avoid too many commitments in an overloaded schedule. Maintain normal routines.
- Volunteer to do something for someone who expects very little.
- Talk about feelings of depression with relatives, a friend, or a minister.

If you need help

If you need help, adopt some of the tips suggested above. Or talk to friends or clergy. For help in an emergency, call GHS' Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740, or toll free at (877) 346-3648, where a counselor is available 24 hours a day. For non-emergency services, call (810) 257-3742. TTY users call (810) 232-6310.

Other Genesee Health System handouts include: *The art of stress reduction and Codependency*. © www.genhs.org