

## PREVENTING POST HOLIDAY DEPRESSION

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Movies such as "It's a Wonderful Life" epitomize the joy, miracles, and wish fulfillment that the holiday season represents. It is a time when family and friends gather together to celebrate life and renew the hope of better times in the future as well as reliving past memories. However, the holidays can also represent somewhat of a public health hazard. This can be due to a number of factors. There is a decreased prohibition against self-indulgence such that people who may have been very guarded and controlled during much of the year now feel emboldened to "let it all hang out." For some, there is almost a magical wish fulfillment followed by very realistic frustrations. This may involve the wish that the entire family who may not speak to each other in the course of the year will suddenly be transformed by the holiday spirit into one big happy family. For others, they may relive unpleasant memories of holidays past and it makes them even more aware of the passage of time and their own impending mortality. It may conjure conflicts between child birth and sibling rivalry. The public rejoicing that generally goes on and inundates us in the media may intensify an individual's own private pain. There are also a number of stresses both biological and social that contribute to the stress of the holidays.

As with any situation, prevention is the most effective way of dealing with potential stressors. However, if you like many others have gone through the holidays and find themselves somewhat depressed and let down afterwards, there are some things that you can do about them at present and in the future to help keep this from recurring.

Effective time management is important in all facets of life. Planning ahead and not saving everything to the last minute such as shopping, cooking, etc., goes a long way toward reducing the stress that we experience.

It is important to have realistic expectations. If you were severely disappointed with how the holidays turned out for you then you may need to re-examine whether or not those expectations were realistic to begin with. Chronic relational problems are not solved magically over the Christmas holidays as they may be in the space of a 30 minute television show. It is important to realize that a critical first step may be undertaken during the holidays which needs to be fostered and nourished throughout the rest of the year as well.

It is important not to overdo in any regard whether it be alcohol, food, lack of sleep, etc. Oftentimes, people do this as a way of experiencing the joy of the holidays or, on the other hand, use it as a way of coping with the isolation and depression that they may be experiencing. It is important to avoid this tendency and use moderation in all things.

It is very important to know one's limits. During the holidays, we try to perform as a Superman or Superwoman and stretch our limits often beyond what we are capable of doing. This can result in fatigue, frustration, depression, etc. You must have the opportunity to recharge your batteries or you are running the risk of serious problems.

Unsatisfying holiday seasons are often the result of an emphasis on the materialistic aspect of the holidays rather than the spiritual or relational. It is important to keep in mind "the reason for the season" which is not simply to see whether we can outspend the Jones', but how we can draw closer to family, friends and God.

It is important to realize that some depression is normal and to be able to distinguish this from more pervasive or clinical types of depression. Major depression would involve such things as a depressed or irritable mood, a loss of interests, a weight loss or gain, too little or too much sleep, psychomotor agitation or retardation, a loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt, poor concentration or indeciveness, and suicidal attempts or threats. If these symptoms occur for more than a few weeks, it may be important to see a professional to deal with this.

Large financial debts are a significant problem for many people over the holidays. Many times noncustodial parents will attempt to "buy" their child's affection or assuage their guilt over a divorce by overspending for their children's gifts. Finding other ways of expressing their love by performing duties or spending more time with the person may be even more appreciated than gifts. If one does run into a large financial debt, then it may be helpful to see a financial planner or other qualified professional to find effective ways of paying one's creditors.

It is important to save time for yourself in order to relax and recharge. Too often during the holidays, we have too little time left for ourselves and get out of our usual routines. It is important to continue or implement an effective exercise program. Even those who are not physically able to engage in strenuous aerobic exercise may be able to walk regularly.

Open communication is important at all times, but even more so through the holidays. If one party feels overwhelmed or put upon, they will very much resent this and it can ruin the holiday for all involved. It is important to be very assertive and open about one's feelings and not be afraid to say no if you are feeling overwhelmed with requests on your time.

During the holidays, we often feel as if no one has experienced one less happy than our own. It doesn't take much effort searching in the newspaper or other media to find that there are many others who are having a less joyous holiday season than we. Be involved especially in doing for those less fortunate in order to regain a sense of the true meaning of the holidays.

It is important to realize that we represent our own worst enemies when it comes to depression. We can create depression for ourselves and stress by the

kinds of things that we say to ourselves. Changing our self talk can go a long way toward changing our perceptions and attitudes and ultimately our feelings about situations.

Another way of dealing with some holiday depression is to formulate and implement a New Year's resolution. While most of us do so and fail to keep it, there are numerous behavior strategies that will enhance the chances that we can follow through on that resolution. Some of them involve forming very specific plans of action with small, measurable steps, forming a mental image of ourselves after the desired change has taken place, sharing our goal with others, re-evaluating our goals periodically and modifying them as necessary, not becoming discouraged easily, developing a formal contract with oneself, and establishing joint goals to insure compliance.

The holidays can be a very joyous time if we plan for them in the right way and have realistic expectations of what they can be for all involved. If you find yourself not bouncing back from any disappointments associated with those holidays, don't be afraid to talk with a trusted friend, doctor, minister, or a mental health professional.