

# Preventing the Holiday Blues

If you just feel a bit down once the holidays have come and gone, you are not alone. Thousands of people experience bouts of stress and winter depression that linger past the holiday season. Called the Holiday Blues, the condition is typically due to the letdown after all the excitement is over.

If you feel more depressed than normal for an extended period of time during or, especially, after the holidays, do not be afraid to seek help from a professional. At the very least, reach out to loved ones and friends for support, and learn ways to cope with the blues you are experiencing.

## Understanding the Holiday Blues

Whether your blues are of the pre- or post-holiday variety, or both, the symptoms are generally the same:

- Lack of energy
- Lack of interest in pleasurable activities
- Decreased sex drive
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increase in sleep and sleepiness
- Increased appetite or lack of interest in eating
- Social avoidance
- Substance abuse

There are many mental and physiological factors that may be causing these symptoms, including:

**Unrealized expectations.** It is natural to feel somewhat pressured before and during the holidays: pressure to buy the perfect gifts for others, to expect the perfect gifts for yourself, to keep family and friends entertained and to get in the spirit of the season. You also may feel pressured to make New Year's resolutions that can be difficult to keep. If you do not meet these expectations, you may feel disappointed.

**Negative associations with the holidays.** Many people do not look forward to the holidays because the season reminds them of something painful. Perhaps your parent, spouse or other loved one passed away recently; the holidays can be an emotional reminder of your loss. Perhaps you dread spending time with certain relatives. These negative feelings often can last beyond the holidays.

**Anticlimactic feelings.** It is difficult to top the warmhearted emotions we often experience during the holiday season. Once all the festivities have ended, the presents have been exchanged and your holiday time off has passed, it is easy to feel a bit melancholy. It may be a long way off until your next holiday or vacation, and the end-of-the-year holidays are another year away.

**Biological reactions to seasonal changes.** Research indicates that lack of sunlight, a hallmark of the winter months in many parts of the world, can disrupt brain hormones and circadian rhythms, which control your body's biological clock. Some scientists believe lack of sunlight may cause an imbalance of neurotransmitters, especially serotonin and dopamine, and that some people have reduced retinal light sensitivity in the darker months. People susceptible to these factors may develop seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a form of depression that commonly begins in early fall and subsides in early spring. Over these darker, typically colder months in which there is less sunlight, people with SAD often experience a range of symptoms that may include feelings of depression and lack of energy. SAD may be linked to hormone and biological-clock imbalances. Experts theorize that people with SAD have biological clocks that may run slower in the winter months.