

The Reality of Holiday Blues

The “holiday blues” is a very real phenomenon which affects thousands of people each year spanning from November through January. While others seem to be uplifted by the holiday season, those experiencing the blues find themselves overcome with feelings of loneliness, fatigue, stress or anxiety.

Many factors contribute to these feelings including mounting deadlines, unrealistic expectations, financial pressures and the stress of family gatherings. Shorter days and reduced sunlight can also trigger seasonal affective disorder (SAD), impacting approximately 20% of Americans each year. SAD is a type of depression that comes and goes with the seasons can bring about a lack of energy, difficulty concentrating and changes in sleep and appetite.

If you or someone you love experience these types of feelings during the holiday season, here are some things to remember that can help make the holidays more tolerable and provide hope for the future.

Keep in mind that seasonal sadness, SAD, or the holiday blues tend to fade once the celebrations are over. Don't become isolated. You don't need to attend every party or gathering, but at the very least, try to stay in contact with friends or small groups of family. Having calendar plans can distract you from thoughts of sadness, especially time spent with people who you care about and who care about you.

Stay active. Force yourself to do activities that will get your heart rate up – a long walk, a workout at the gym, an energetic house cleaning. Exercise can reduce stress levels, clear your mind and give you a sense of accomplishment. Eating poorly or drinking excessively can exacerbate levels of sadness and stress. Alcohol seems to be everywhere during the holidays, try to avoid drinking pitfalls by sticking to a strict one drink limit or providing your own alcohol-free alternatives.

Don't compare yourself with others. You don't need to have the best decorations, the most expensive gifts or the largest party. You don't need to do any of that. Do what feels good to you and stand by it!

Give to receive. Consider volunteering your time at a local non-profit or giving to local charities. It's amazing how giving to others can wash away feelings of sadness or anxiety. If you are not interested in volunteering, be generous with your compliments to others. Notice their gratitude and how much they appreciate your kind words!

When it comes to family, set realistic expectations. Don't hope or expect that everything will be perfect. No family is perfect. If holidays spark conflict, or if an individual or family is experiencing a recent loss, allow everyone (including yourself) to process and react in their own ways. Try to focus on what you have and are grateful for instead of feelings of deficiency or loss.

The holidays can be a very difficult time. If struggles with stress or depression continue into the new year, don't hesitate in reaching out to a professional counselor for assistance. A counselor can help you address any issues you may be dealing with and provide you with a plan, hope and promise for the year ahead. Lutheran Counseling and Family Services of Wisconsin counselors have time for you. They can be reached at 414-536-8333.