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Mental Health Matters

*Published by ACPs
Office of Public Information*

December 2019



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9 Ways to Manage the Holiday Blues

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There are many things that can contribute to the holiday blues. Whether it's something as simple as overscheduling yourself or a deeper emotional need, it's possible to work through your feelings and start anew. Here are nine ways to deal with the holiday blues:

1. **Limit alcohol.** Drinking in excess can affect your mood and amplify any negative feelings that you may have.
2. **Get plenty of sleep.** Being well rested can improve your mood and help you feel ready to take on that day.
3. **Learn to say "no".** Overscheduling and not making time for you can lead to emotional breakdowns. Stay firm on your decision to say "no".
4. **Be open to new traditions.** Instead of holding on to what the holiday should have been, allow new traditions to unfold.
5. **Get support when mourning a loved one.** Although it can be tempting to isolate yourself and grieve, it can be beneficial to spend time with your friends and family as they can support you through this difficult time.
6. **Spend time with loved ones.** Instead of spending the holidays alone at home, get your friends or family together for a dinner party. The more the merrier!
7. **Exercise regularly.** A quick 10-minute walk will get your heart rate up and release mood-boosting endorphins.
8. **Do something fun to get over a recent breakup.** Instead of sitting at home, fill up your calendar with activities.
9. **Avoid overeating.** Before heading out to social events, fill up on veggies. Holiday overeating can affect your mood and overall well-being.



How to Deal with Stress & Depression During the Holidays

Source: Jennifer Purdie

The holiday season can trigger depression for a number of reasons. You may not be able to make it home for the holidays, or you may be in a rough financial situation. If you're going through a difficult time, it can be tough to see others with extra joy in their lives.

Seasonal depression is more common than you think. Approximately 14% of Americans experience the "winter blues". These blues can be especially overwhelming during a time of change. Christmas and New Year's Eve often present challenging demands, from never-ending parties to family obligations. These events can come with higher levels of stress.

If you're dealing with feelings of stress or depression, know you aren't alone. There are ways to manage your symptoms and get the help you need. The most common symptom of the holiday blues is amplified depression. This is true of people who may or may not be dealing with depression already.

You may be dealing with a bout of seasonal depression if you feel like simple activities are more difficult than normal. This includes getting out of bed, making dinner, and taking a walk.

Other symptoms of the blues include: feeling more tired than usual, losing interest in things that used to bring you joy, or having trouble concentrating.

The holidays can be an especially difficult time for older adults. If you're unable to be with friends or family, look for volunteer opportunities that allow you to be around others.

If you're still feeling depressed after the holidays are over, you may be dealing with more than just a case of the holiday blues. You should speak with your doctor about your symptoms as they can help you determine the cause and develop a treatment plan.

The holiday blues are real and can disrupt your life in a serious manner. You may be able to ease your symptoms by making a few lifestyle changes, but if lifestyle changes aren't relieving your symptoms, you should speak with your doctor.

You may also benefit from prescribed antidepressant medication. The side effects of these can vary, and you may need to try out a few before settling on one that works for you.

Helpful vs. Harmful: Ways to Manage Emotions

Negative emotions like fear, sadness, and anger are a basic part of life, and sometimes we struggle with how to deal with them effectively. It can be tempting to act on what you're feeling right away, but that often doesn't fix the situation that caused the emotions. In fact, it may lead to more problems to deal with down the road.

Some of the harmful ways that people deal with negative emotions are as follows:

- **Denial.** Denial is when a person refuses to accept that anything is wrong or that help may be needed.
- **Withdrawal.** Withdrawal is when a person doesn't want to be around or participate in activities with other people. This is different than wanting to be alone from time to time.
- **Bullying.** Bullying is when a person uses force, threats, or ridicule to show power over others.
- **Self-harm.** Self-harm can take many forms including cutting, starving one's self, bingeing and purging, or participating in dangerous behavior.
- **Substance use.** Substance use is the use of alcohol and other drugs to make a person feel better or numb about painful situations.

The good news is that with practice, everyone can do a better job of dealing with their negative emotions in healthy ways. One way to deal with uncomfortable or unpleasant emotions is to remember the word PATH, which stands for Pause, Acknowledge, Think, Help.

- **Step 1: Pause.** This step is important because instead of acting on feelings right away, you stop yourself and think things through. Count to 100 or say the alphabet backwards.

- **Step 2: Acknowledge what you're feeling.** For example, are you mad at someone, or are you sad because your feelings were hurt by what they did? Whatever it is that you are feeling, it is ok to feel that way.
- **Step 3: Think.** Now that you have take a few moments to figure out what exactly it is that you are feeling, think about how you can make yourself feel better.
- **Step 4: Help.** Take an action to help yourself based upon what you came up with in the step 3.

Here are a few ways to help you:

- Mood boosters (read, watch a funny video or movie, play with an animal)
- Address your basic needs (eat healthy, drink water, shower, nap)
- Process feelings (draw, make a list, scream, cry, vent)
- Problem solving (make a list of solutions and strengths, talk with a person who upset you)
- Volunteering/Acts of Kindness
- Hobbies or stress relievers (learn something new, create something, write, get active, play, plant a garden)
- Relaxation exercises (belly breathing, muscle relaxation, walking, meditation, yoga, read, listen to music, unplug)
- Ask for help (text a friend, call family, talk to an adult)

If you still feel sad, worried, or scared after trying to help yourself, you might be showing the early warning signs of anxiety or depression. A screening is an anonymous, free, and private way to learn about your mental health. Visit www.mhascreening.org to take a screen.



Stress: Coping with Everyday Problems

Everyone has stress. It is a normal part of life. You can feel stress in your body when you have too much to do or when you haven't slept well. You can also feel stress when you worry about things like your job, money, relationships, or a friend or family member who is ill or in crisis.

In response to these strains your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, metabolism, and blood flow to your muscles. This response is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a high-pressure situation. However, when you are constantly reacting to stressful situations without making adjustments to counter the effects, you will feel stress, which can threaten your health and well being.

Tips for Reducing or Controlling Stress

- Be realistic and learn to say “no”.
- Shed the “superman/superwoman” urge to be perfect.
- Meditate
- Visualize
- Take one thing at a time.
- Exercise
- Find a hobby
- Share your feelings
- Be flexible
- Go easy with criticism of yourself

If you think that you or someone you know may be under more stress than just dealing with a passing difficulty, it may be helpful to talk with your doctor, clergy person, or employee assistance professional. They may suggest you visit with a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or other qualified counselor. If you or someone you know is in crisis, seek help immediately. Call 1-800-273-TALK to reach a 24-hour crisis center or dial 911 for immediate assistance.

Managing Your Emotional Reactions

Managing emotional reactions means choosing how and when to express the emotions we feel. People who do a good job of managing emotions know that it's healthy to express their feelings but that it matters how (and when) they express them. Because of this, they're able to react to situations in productive ways.

You've probably been in a situation where someone reacted in a way that was too emotional, making you cringe or feel embarrassed for the person. You also might have been in a situation where your own emotions felt so strong that it took all of your self-control not to go down that path yourself.

The skills we use to manage our emotions and react well are part of a bigger group of emotional skills called emotional intelligence. Developing all the skills that make up EQ takes time and practice.

People who react well are already good at some basic EQ skills – being able to notice and identify the emotions we feel at any given moment, and understanding why we feel the way we do. This helps us accept our emotions, and recognize that it's ok to feel the way we do without blaming others or judging ourselves.

Once these basic skills feel natural, you're more able to manage what you actually do when you feel strong emotions. Practicing them will also help you get past difficult emotions faster.

What Kids Say About Handling Stress

Compared with what adults face, it might seem like kids don't have that much to stress about. But kids have their own concerns – and sometimes feel stress, just as adults do. And kids' stresses can be just as overwhelming, particularly if they don't have effective coping strategies.

A KidsHealth poll recently explored what kids stress about the most, how they cope with these feelings, and what they want their parents to do about it. The poll showed that kids are dealing with their stresses in both healthy and unhealthy ways, and while they may not say so, they do want their parents to reach out and help them cope with their feelings.

The poll also underscored how important it is for parents to teach kids to recognize and express their emotions, and to use healthy ways to cope with the stress they experience. By guiding them to healthy coping skills, parents can help prepare kids to tackle whatever stresses they meet throughout their lives.

Results of the Poll

Kids said that they were stressed out the most by grades, school and homework (36%), family (32%), and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21%). They indicated that they cope by playing or doing something active, listening to music, watching TV or playing a video game, talking to a friend, trying not to think about it, trying to work things out, eating something, losing their temper, talking to a parent, and crying.

About 25% of kids surveyed said that when they are upset, they take it out on themselves, either by banging their heads against something, hitting themselves, or doing something else to hurt themselves. This may be shocking to parents, but for some kids, feelings of stress, frustration, helplessness, hurt, or anger can be overwhelming. And without a way to express or release the feelings, a kid may feel like a



volcano ready to erupt.

The poll also revealed important news for parents. 75% of the kids surveyed said they want and need their parents' help in times of trouble. When they're stressed, they'd like their parents to talk with them, help them solve the problem, try to cheer them up, or just spend time together.

Parents may not be able to prevent their kids from feeling frustrated, sad, or angry, but they can provide them with the tools they need to cope with these emotions.

- **Notice out loud.** Tell kids when you notice something they might be feeling.
- **Listen to your kids.** Ask them what's wrong and listen attentively and calmly.
- **Comment briefly** on the feelings you think your child was experiencing as you listen.
- **Put a label on it.** Use feeling words to help kids learn to identify emotions by name.
- **Help kids think** of things to do to feel better or solve a problem.
- **Just be there.** Give them space and still make it clear that you'll be there when they're ready to talk.
- **Be patient.** Try to resist the urge to fix every problem, and focus instead on helping them grow into good problem solvers.

The national KidsPoll surveyed 875 9-13 year old boys and girls regarding how they coped with stress.