Lifting your spirits during the holidays

Holiday season can be depressing for some people. The more pressure you feel to be cheery, the sadder you may become. Here are some tips to help with these emotions:

• Skip parties you don’t really want to attend. Don’t force yourself to “make merry.” On the other hand, don’t isolate yourself completely. That can make you feel worse. Choose one or two events to attend where you’ll feel most comfortable.

• Take a break from holiday stress. Feeling pressure about decorating and shopping? Resist the urge to make things perfect. Instead, be kind to yourself. Take time to relax or meet a friend for coffee. Skip the holiday TV shows if they make you feel blue.

• Volunteer. Many food banks and other services for the needy look for volunteers during the holidays. Be a volunteer. It can help you forget about your own problems for a while. It can also make you feel good about doing things for others.

• Don’t overspend. If you get into debt over the holidays, you’ll be bluer when the bills come in. If you want to give gifts, get creative. Make “gift cards” for things like a trip with you to a museum, your help with household repairs or an afternoon at the movies. Remember, it’s the thought — not the price — that counts.

• Start new traditions. If old family customs make you sad, create some new ones. Include the people who matter in your life right now. Try new activities that feel fun and meaningful. They may become your new traditions.

• Watch your sugar and alcohol intake. Holidays bring lots of fun treats and desserts. But overdoing it can affect your mood and energy. Try to control your eating and drinking.

• Stay active. Depression can weigh you down. Fight back by taking short walks or doing anything active. Exercise can lift your mood and help you manage stress.

Finding help

If you find yourself struggling with significant depression, seek professional help. Research indicates a high level of success with appropriate help.

• SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

• National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 or 1-800-273-8225

• Your company’s Employee Assistance Program or behavioral health benefits

• 911 for emergency services

This material provides a general overview of the topic. Health information is not a substitute for diagnosis or treatment by a therapist, physician or other health care professional. Contact a health care professional with any questions or concerns about specific health care needs.

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Approaching the holiday season with an open mind

For many people, the holiday season is a time for good cheer, shopping and family gatherings. For others, the holidays can be a hard time. Many people feel more stress, disappointment, guilt and sadness this time of year.

All these emotions along with the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute to added stress and uncertainty. Maybe having gatherings is still a challenge for you and your loved ones during the pandemic. One way to combat these negative emotions is to cut yourself some slack and embrace self-care.

Tips for a happier holiday

- Be reasonable. Don’t expect perfection.
- Give yourself and others a break. Don’t get upset if things don’t go as planned.
- Give yourself grace. Don’t try to be superhuman. If you start to feel sad, let yourself be and feel those emotions. Then try to get busy. A new project, book or activity can help ease your heart.
- Manage your time. Let others know what you can and can’t do. Don’t say “yes” when you really mean “no.”
- Ask for support and take it. When someone offers help — whether it’s a shoulder to cry on or a quiet dinner together — take it. It’s important to lean on your support system.
- Take care of yourself. Watch what you eat and drink. Get enough sleep and make time for exercise.
- Let go of expectations. It’s okay if you don’t feel like decorating nicely this year. Give yourself a break. If you don’t want to track down gifts for everyone, buy gift cards instead. People who know and care about you will understand.
- Carefully choose the events you want to attend. Celebrate with people whose company lifts your spirits. Focus on the true meaning of the holidays for you.
- If you’re away from family and friends, or have experienced the loss of a loved one, share your feelings of grief. Keep the demands on your time, energy and wallet to a minimum. It’s okay to pass on an activity if you’re not feeling up to it.
- Get professional support. Support from a mental health expert during the holidays is a great idea. And if sad or lonely feelings stay beyond the holidays, seek help. Skilled professionals can help you deal with the pain of depression, anxiety and any other troubling feelings you have. Reach out.

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Avoiding a financial "holiday hangover"

Companies will never complain if you spend too much during the holiday season. But you might feel a pang of remorse when the credit card bills start arriving in January.

You don’t have to spend a fortune to show your loved ones how much you care. Here are some quick tips to help you avoid a “holiday hangover” once the season passes.

**Set spending limits**

Start with a review of your budget. Figure out how much you can afford to spend without going into debt.

Many people find it helps to set a price limit for each gift. Or you may find it easier to work with the total amount you can afford for all holiday expenses. Be sure to factor in “extras” such as:

- That item for the office gift exchange
- Decorations for your home
- Postage and shipping for cards and gifts
- Gifts for your child’s teachers or relatives who give you surprise presents

**Make a list and check it twice**

What works for Santa can work for you! Make a list of all the people you wish to give presents. Put a spending limit next to each name.

Then add everything up to ensure the total doesn’t push you beyond the maximum you’ve set. If it does, consider making changes—such as baking treats for some people on the list or chipping in with others.

**Find the best prices**

Take the time to check prices — not only across retailers, but online too. Sales often start the week before Thanksgiving. Sometimes even earlier. And be sure to look for coupons, coupon codes or rebate offers.

**Control costs within the family**

Large families can have each member draw one name out of a hat. That way everyone gives and gets one gift. Or adults may all agree to skip their gifts entirely so the money can be used for all the kids in the family.

When it comes to the children, even the savviest bargain shopper can easily spend too much. After all, seeing kids’ eyes light up is part of what makes gift-giving worthwhile.

Instead of getting caught up in the spending, consider ways to keep things grounded. For example, let your kids know you’ll get them one major gift on their wish list plus two smaller ones.

If you set limits ahead of time and stick with them, you can lower your stress through the holidays and into the new year.
Stress strategies for the holidays

The holidays—a time of festivities, parties, shopping, entertaining, religious observances, family gatherings, decorating and...stress! With all the extra demands we place on ourselves and the expectations of the season, is it any wonder that most of us feel some stress during the holiday season? The source of holiday stress is simple: when it comes to time, money and social and family commitments, most people try to do too much. Here are some strategies for making your holidays a time of renewal.

**Set Priorities**

People tend to overextend themselves during the holidays. It’s not necessary to attend every party and religious celebration on the docket. When allotting your limited time, choose quality over quantity. Decide which activities you and your family would most enjoy doing and focus on those. Share responsibilities for cooking and baking with others. Learn to say “no” gently but firmly to social events that are over your limit.

**Plan Ahead**

Nothing creates more holiday stress than last-minute shopping and preparations. Take charge of your holidays in advance by making lists of things to do and setting aside some time each day for them. Consider setting a cutoff date; after that date, things that haven’t gotten done will be deferred until next year.

**Keep it Simple**

A holiday feast doesn’t have to be elaborate to be wonderful. Often traditional fare is appreciated most, with guests providing a few of the dishes. When shopping, take advantage of gift-wrapping services. Try shopping at home from mail order catalogs or shop online. Let others compete for the “most fabulous holiday preparations” award!

**Stay in Budget**

Do holiday preparations strain your budget? Learn to say “no” to expensive holiday ideas. Choose simple, thoughtful or useful gifts over elaborate, expensive surprises. How can you enjoy the holidays if you’re worried about paying your bills?

**Riding the Emotional Roller Coaster**

The holidays are hard on your emotions. The holidays of your childhood may take on a magical glow that’s often impossible to recover in adulthood. While the radios and department stores are blaring messages of peace and joy, you’re dreading the family gathering that always leads to someone not speaking to someone else. If family gatherings are stressful, avoid long visits, either in your house or away. Defer settling family arguments until some other time. Be willing to let go of old traditions if they no longer work for your family and find new ones that do.

**Take Care of Yourself**

Counter the holiday pressures by giving yourself some time for rest and renewal each day. Avoid overindulgence in holiday food, alcohol and caffeine. Take an afternoon or evening walk around the neighborhood to admire the decorations and release stress. Think about what the holidays are actually celebrating and try to stay true to that spirit. Peace and joy can be more than just a department store come-on.
Managing grief during the holidays

It’s very painful to feel the loss of loved ones during holiday season. Grief can make holiday joy seem out of reach. But there are ways to feel better. Try some of the ideas listed here to help handle your emotions during the holidays.

Ask for emotional support

Ask someone you trust if you can call them if you need support. Keep this person’s phone number handy.

Don’t be afraid to enjoy yourself

You may find that you do want to go to some dinners or parties. Yet you may think, “If I act happy, others will believe I didn’t care about my loved one.”

First of all, no one can judge your actions or feelings: They’re yours. Second, you’re “re-learning life” without your loved one. Don’t believe that having some fun dishonors your grief or your love.

Do something for somebody else

One way to deal with grief is to distract yourself a bit.

• Volunteer or just do something nice for someone else. This takes your mind off your grief and gives you a chance to help others.

• If you have the emotional energy, buy some gifts. Making others happy can help boost your mood.

Try not to withdraw

Keeping to yourself can lead to depression. Consider taking part in some activities. Having people around you can help you feel better.

Allow past memories to come to mind

The holidays are likely to bring back some painful memories. That’s okay. Write about your feelings in a journal. Or share your emotions with someone close.

If you wish, visit places that were special to you and your loved one

This may help in the grieving process or it may be too intense. If you go, take someone with you to provide support. If your feelings are overwhelming, put away this visit for another time.

Remember that your feelings are natural

It can take a year or more to work through grief. Eventually, you’ll be able to remember the good times and also move on with your life.

Take care of yourself

You need to take good care of yourself while grieving.

• Stay active but see your doctor before starting any new exercise.

• Eat healthy meals and get enough sleep.

• Consider seeing a counselor or therapist to talk about your loss. This can help you work through your grief.

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