

Silent plight: For some, the holidays are a time of stress and strain

by R.J. Ignelzi

It's that time of year again. Christmas carols trumpet across crowded malls. Tiny lights twinkle from rooftops and trees. Homes fill with laughter and frivolity.

SILENT PLIGHT - For some, the holidays are a time of stress and strain; we offer some ways to banish the blues from the season. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. And all you want to do is burrow into the sofa with the TV remote and a bag of Oreos.

While the holiday season is a time of giving, goodwill and cheer for many people, for some others it can mean weeks of sadness, despair and increased anxiety.

"The holiday blues are a result of a high-pressure time that is intensified by commercialism and expectations of past holidays," says George Pratt, a psychologist at Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego. "We can all be affected this time of year, particularly if we have expectations that exceed our ability to cope with the holidays."

The holiday blues aren't restricted to the Christmas season. They can happen at any holiday or vacation time.

"Because so much of the world celebrates the holidays at this time of year, it's hard to escape it," says William Perry, psychiatry professor and associate director of neuropsychiatry and behavioral medicine at the University of California San Diego Medical Center. "We are told that we're supposed to feel happy and excited this time of year, and if we don't, we have self-doubt and a sense of unsettledness."

The holiday blues can mimic a low-grade clinical depression. There's likely to be a disruption of sleep, appetite and concentration. A negative mood, lethargy, feeling of low self-worth and maybe an increase in

physical pain are common.

What distinguishes it from a more serious depression is duration and severity. It generally dissipates after the festivities are over and life's normal routine resumes.

But just because holiday blues are temporary doesn't mean you shouldn't take this seasonal depression seriously. No matter if it lasts five days or five weeks, it's too long to feel miserable and not enjoy life. Because different people are emotionally affected by different triggers, it's important to determine what contributes to your dark mood, so you can work to ease or prevent it.

"It's important for people to know it's OK to be stressed at the holidays," Pratt says. "Many people have the holiday blues. But you really need to plan for it so you don't have to suffer."

Mental health experts caution that if the depression impacts your life to the point that you lose your ability to work and function, you need to seek professional intervention.

The following are some common causes of the holiday blues and what you can do to feel better.

- No matter how early you start, it seems there's always too much to do in too little time. The demands of shopping, decorating, baking, parties and houseguests can contribute to a blue mood.

Keep in mind you don't have to do everything that's asked of you or that you've done in the past. Assert yourself and just say "no" if you don't have the time or inclination to do something.

Delegate responsibilities to other family members. Pace yourself and organize your time by making lists and prioritizing activities. And remember to take some time out to relax, recharge your batteries and just have some fun.

"See a funny movie or be with special friends. Do something that's not an obligation and not specific to the holidays," Pratt says. "Do something that just makes you feel good."

- Don't set yourself up for disappointment by comparing today's holidays with the "good ol' days."

"Many people have this fantasy about what Christmas is supposed to be," Perry says. "They hold onto what they remember as an ideal holiday from their past and try to make everything perfect."

Unfortunately, they rarely succeed.

Chances are those Christmases of your childhood were not as perfect as you remember them. Instead of creating unrealistic expectations, embrace change, expect mistakes and establish reasonable goals for the holidays. Just because your mother or mother-in-law always did things a certain way, doesn't mean you have to.

- Financial worries can contribute to an already stressful time. People often fret over how they will afford this year's holiday and then become anxious about soon-to-follow credit-card bills.

"The holidays have become extremely commercialized with lots of pressure to buy," Perry says. "Toys and gifts are expensive, and people can be under tremendous financial strain."

Know your spending limit and stick to it. While it may be too late to make adjustments to your holiday gift list for this year, prepare now for the next season. Suggest that next year everyone draw names for gifts, have a strict spending limit, or restrict gift giving to the youngest children.

If funds are tight this year, there are plenty of activities that you can enjoy for free. Drive around and look at holiday decorations. Get a group together to sing Christmas carols. Take in the tree-lighting ceremonies and parades around the county. Try to make the holidays more about family and friendship and less about material things.

- The absence of a loved one, no matter if due to death, divorce or military duty, is especially deeply felt during the holidays.

"If you're separated from family or have lost a loved one, even if the death was 10 years ago, there's a tendency to reflect back on other holiday seasons when that person was there," Pratt says. "There's a feeling of nostalgia and a desire for connection and wishing they could be with you."

This might be a good time to create new and different ways to celebrate. Abandon old traditions and start some new ones.

Go to someone else's home to celebrate. Instead of cooking, have dinner at a restaurant. Plan a holiday trip.

"Create new memories for the future," Pratt says.

If you know it will be a difficult holiday because you've lost someone or a loved one is away, "spend time with people who care about you," Perry says. "Don't allow yourself to be alone and dwell on feeling melancholy."

- Some of the lethargy and fatigue we feel this time of year may be partly due to overindulgences that can affect us mentally as well as physically.

"With all the festivities and social pressure, we find ourselves eating too much, drinking too much and exercising and sleeping too little," Perry says. "Eventually, it affects our mood and energy level."

Excessive drinking will only increase feelings of depression. And while it may be difficult to resist the cookies and fudge offered at every turn, too many goodies only add up to unwanted pounds. That can put anybody in a bad mood.

Nobody is saying you have to deny yourself an occasional gingerbread cookie or a glass of champagne. Just indulge in moderation. And, to counter those extra calories, step up your exercise routine a notch.

"Exercise is absolutely essential, even if it's just a brisk 10-minute walk one way and 10-minute walk back done daily," Pratt says. "It can reduce the stress hormone adrenaline, bring clarity of mind and give you a chance to think through your priorities."

- People who are alone and without any strong relationships may feel an increased emptiness and isolation at this time of year.

"If people are not happy in their life and don't have closeness with others, they may feel left out of the celebration," Pratt says. "However, this can serve as incentive to connect in other ways, like working with a volunteer group."

People who volunteer reap as many benefits from their generosity as those receiving the help.

"(Volunteers experience) the joy and pleasure of being part of a larger process," Pratt says. "It takes the focus off of you and can be very fulfilling."

- For some people, the end of the year means a harsh accounting of the past year's failures. That's difficult for anyone to face.

"It's a cognitive leap that we evaluate the past year and think about whether or not we lost the weight we wanted to, was it a financially successful year, or did we have good interpersonal relationships," Perry says. "There's a lot of self-evaluation this time of year, and it can be hard to measure up."

Instead of being so critical of your performance over the past year, focus on what you have to be thankful for. Pratt suggests creating a top 10 gratitude list for the year, the month, or even for the day.

"Think about what you have to be grateful for - even the small things. It causes you to feel and appreciate what you have ... and will enable you to think more positively," he says.

- The difference in light and temperature in December compared with August can be a depressive trigger for some people, especially when combined with the other stresses and strains of the season.

"As the amount of available light decreases this time of year, some people are getting up and going to work in the dark and coming home after it's dark," Perry says. "Some people can be very sensitive to this, and it can have a significant impact on their physiology."

The seasonal changes can make people feel fatigued, cause changes in appetite leading to weight gain or loss, and alter the sleep cycle.

Mental health experts recommend making an extra effort to get some sunlight into your day. Instead of taking your coffee break in the cafeteria, walk outdoors. Park at the far end of the parking lot so you must walk for five minutes to get inside a store.

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