

## Coping with Holiday Stress

**December 6, 2019**

The holiday season can be a time of joy, parties and family gatherings. But for many people, it is also a time of high levels of stress or holiday blues.

“The three main triggers for holiday stress or depression are closely tied to relationships, physical demands and financial constraints that intensify during the holidays,” explained Jamie Benner, Program Manager for Salem Regional Medical Center’s Behavioral Medicine and Wellness Center.



Tensions may be heightened during the holidays when family misunderstandings and conflicts are often more noticeable. On the other hand, if you're facing the holidays without a loved one, you may find yourself especially lonely or sad.”

“In addition, the physical strain of shopping, attending social gatherings and preparing holiday meals can leave people feeling exhausted. Exercise and sleep may take a back seat to heavy schedules and overindulgence in food or drink. Overspending during the holidays on gifts, travel, food and entertainment may also increase stress, as people try to make ends meet while ensuring that everyone on their gift list is happy.”

“Signs of stress can include feeling impatient, worried, irritable or depressed,” Benner added. “People may also experience physical changes related to their sleep or eating patterns, or other symptoms like muscle tension, headaches, fatigue or stomach aches.”

“Many people also experience a post-holiday letdown after January 1. This letdown can result from disappointments during the preceding months compounded by the excess fatigue, financial obligations and stress of the holidays.”

### **Coping Skills**

Common seasonal stressors and tips for managing them include:

**Shopping and Gift Giving:** “Set a budget and keep track of your holiday spending,” Benner suggested. “Make lists of needed items and purchased gifts, and start shopping early to avoid last minute impulse purchases.”

Unfortunately, many people end up paying for gifts and other Christmas expenses long after the season has ended, with nearly one-third of Americans still paying off their debts from the previous holiday season.

“Overspending may lead to feelings of anxiousness and depression when the bills start to arrive after the holidays. Consider giving homemade gifts or drawing names for a less expensive gift exchange. Try not to equate love with the cost and quantity of gifts.”

**Decorating:** “Simplify holiday decorating by selecting only your favorite items to display. After the holidays are over, organize and pack things away so that it is easier to decorate next year.”

**Family Expectations:** “If you are hosting a holiday gathering, don’t worry about having a perfectly cleaned or decorated house. Ask others to help with the cooking or to bring their favorite dish. Evaluate past traditions and be willing to let go of your ideas of the way things ‘should be’.”

**Personal Health:** “Take care of yourself by getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods, drinking plenty of water and exercising regularly. Set realistic goals for yourself and leave some time unplanned for relaxation. If you need help, don’t hesitate to ask a loved one or friend for assistance.”

### **The Holiday Blues**

Feelings of sadness, loneliness and anger can intensify during the holidays and may be factors for holiday depression, including:

- Associating the holidays with unresolved family issues, childhood experiences or an expectation that you "should" feel happy
- Facing the loss of or isolation from a loved one or a major disappointment
- Having unrealistic expectations of yourself, your family or friends
- Drinking more alcohol, a depressant, which is more available during the holidays

“Try to spend time with people who care about you,” she recommended. “If you feel there is no one available, then reach out to others in need or attend a religious service or community gathering so that you are not alone. If you feel you need the help of a trained professional to sort through your feelings, don’t be afraid to seek assistance.”

Lastly, it is important to recognize the difference between holiday depression and clinical depression. Signs of clinical depression include:

- A disruption in "normal" activity that affects work and inter-personal relationships
- Inability to enjoy life or feel pleasure
- Listlessness
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits

- Thoughts of suicide or personal harm

“If you or a loved one experiences the signs of clinical depression, you should speak to a physician or trained mental health professional immediately to discuss the treatment options available,” Benner concluded.

Jamie Benner is the Program Manager for the Behavioral Medicine and Wellness Center at Salem Regional Medical Center, which offers specialized outpatient treatment for adults facing a range of mental health issues. The Behavioral Medicine and Wellness Center is located at 2020 East State Street, Suite J, in Salem, 330-337-4935.

###