



SECRETS TO BEATING THE HOLIDAY BLUES

By Steve Wilson

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Here We Go Again

Heading toward the end of the year at the supermarket where we do our grocery shopping, the Halloween candy shows up on display just after Labor Day, and the Christmas decorations are on sale before Columbus Day. At this rate, it won't be long before Valentine's candy will be on sale around Thanksgiving, and the Easter bunny will arrive on New Years' Day! Is it just me, or are you feeling rushed into a celebrational mood, too?

October, November, and December are the most difficult, emotionally-loaded quarter of the year. More than any other time, this particular string of holidays and seasonal changes brings a boat-load of mixed emotions such as nostalgia, sentimentality, melodrama, bittersweet celebrations, poignancy, sadness, loss, and homesickness. And there is the added pressure of decision such as what presents to buy, for whom, how much can you afford to spend, and who to visit when. No wonder we call these three months *emotionally loaded*.

Every holiday can bring on emotional highs and lows, but what we must cope with when the holidays bunch up as they do at the end of the year provokes the worst extremes for most people.

The "Holiday Blues" Have Several Causes

- Inevitably, the wrappings will come off family feelings. "Family holidays always ignite nostalgia about experiences in our family of origin. And just as reliably, they stir up all manner of leftover family business... bruised feelings and strained relations abound," according to a report in *Psychology Today* magazine. "Family ties may be tightest at these times, but so are family tensions. Holidays activate everyone's longings for visibility, for recognition, for admiration, for love. At the same time,

they stir old fears--of not being nurtured, of being humiliated in the eyes of others, especially brothers and sisters, of not being appreciated. The piling up of emotional vulnerability provides a critical mass for reaction."

- Not feeling what we are "supposed" to feel: happy and joyous. Feeling forced to get in the holiday spirit when we don't want to be. (But why do we have to feel anything in particular, anyway?)
- Great expectations (ours and others') and equally great disappointments.
- Gift-giving anxiety.
- Being reminded of our current economic or social situation(such as being unemployed, widowed, or separated from loved ones).
- Guilt over doing well while others lack basic needs.
- Old grudges and family feuds resurface.
- Feeling that time has passed you by and you have not accomplished what you wanted to do with your life.

Watch For Delayed Reactions

It is a common misconception that a mental health counselor's business will increase dramatically during the last few months of the year. In fact, when faced with the pressures of the holidays, most of us are likely to promise ourselves not to let them get us down. You may tell yourself, "I cannot let myself fall apart now. I have to hold it together. I am going to get through the holidays for the sake of family and friends." And most people do get through, only to "crash" in January, February, and March. Those pent-up feelings worsen after the New Year when the dismal gray and cold of winter drags on and on. (Suicide rates may go up if Spring is very late.) The let-down is awful.

EIGHTEEN WAYS TO KEEP YOUR EMOTIONAL BALANCE

Here are some things you can do to reduce the likelihood of becoming an emotional casualty of the holidays.

1. Keep going to laughter club!
2. Tell people how you feel. Do not isolate yourself.
3. Give yourself and everyone else permission to feel less than perfect.

4. Talk openly to a trusted friend or family member.
5. Get some exercise.
6. Avoid drugs or alcohol.
7. Do something you're good at.
8. Function within your routine.
9. Do something nice for yourself.
10. Look at your unhappy feelings logically.
11. Stay away from depressed or emotionally upset people.
12. Give yourself some quiet time.
13. Maintain contact with your counselor or support group.
14. Keep your holiday expectations realistic. Expect the intensity of holiday togetherness to breed some irritability, and take it in stride.
15. Give added attention to the things you enjoy.
16. Don't take on more responsibility than you can comfortably handle.
17. Skip the commercialized pressures. Don't go into debt for gift-giving. Give what represents the real spirit of the season: your time, attention, and caring.
18. Negotiate to get a reasonable amount of whatever you need (time, attention, support). At the same time, be flexible about the way things are done. Build some change into family rituals.

The keys to managing holiday stress are *balance, pacing, and perspective*. Balance your nutritional intake, limit your intake of sugar, and drink lots of water. Don't over-eat or over-drink (alcohol). Pace yourself through your work/rest cycle (you might try to get nine hours of sleep at night at least twice a week). Take five 2-minute breaks during the workday to do something relaxing. Take your time; don't let yourself get to the end of the year with vacation days leftover. Balance vocation with vacation: take in a funny movie or rent a comedy video, do 20-30 minutes of outdoor walking a few times each week, be playful (with your golf, tennis, euchre, or whatever)

HO-HO-HOLDING UP INSTEAD OF LETTING-DOWN

MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL: keep a healthy *perspective*. Don't make mountains out of molehills. Keep reminding yourself that it is the thought--not the price of a gift-- that counts. Remember to focus on the original spirit of the season. And, of course, hang on to your sense of humor. Look for the lighter side of the holiday hullabaloo. I have collected a few Holiday Ha-Ha's to get your Ho-Ho's started:

- You can't blame Indians for being upset. To the world, Columbus was a great explorer. To the Native Americans, he was a subdivider.
- I love Halloween. It's the only night of the year rock stars look natural.
- It's all right to scare people at Halloween, but this year I think kids are overdoing it. I saw one of them dressed up as a heating oil bill.
- Last Halloween there was a knock at the door, I opened it and there were my three kids dressed up as the scariest thing I could ever imagine --my three kids!
- To me, Thanksgiving is a very important time of the year. It's my stomach's busy season.
- My wife and I always have an equitable division of labor on Thanksgiving. She shops, cooks, sets the table, serves, cleans up -- and I tell her who's winning the game.
- Santa Claus makes a list of who's naughty or nice. I just hope he grades on a curve.
- Millions of people go home for the holidays. It's a combination of nostalgia, tradition, and the need to be reminded of why they moved away.
- Every Christmas people give me sweaters they say will fit me to a "T". The trouble is-- I'm an "O".
- What kind of year was it? I just put my calendar into the shredder. What a relief. I'm almost done with my Christmas shopping...for 2007.
- For the holidays, my doctor put me on a Mistletoe Diet. All the foods I like, I have to kiss off.
- My kid wouldn't write Santa a letter because she didn't have his e-mail address.
- Of course Santa Claus is jolly. You'd be jolly too, if you just came off an 11-month vacation.

Don't sing those old holiday blues this year. Keep your balance and your good sense of humor, be flexible, and don't expect perfection. Remember the spirit of the season without getting caught up in the commercialism, and maybe you will actually find yourself whistling a happy tune.

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