



# Managing Holiday Stress

## The Most Wonderful Time of the Year?

Fall has quickly faded into winter, and winter brings colder weather and the holidays. 'Tis the season to be jolly! Christmas music fills the air, festive decorations pop up at every corner, and everyone's heart fills with joy, right?

Wrong. In fact, many people feel depressed, sad, lonely, and anxious or stressed during the holiday season.

In between the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and family get-togethers, routines get pushed aside and it can become difficult to manage the expectations of a perfect holiday experience. The holiday season often brings excitement, anticipation and joy; but for some, it also brings anxiety, stress, and loneliness.

Typical sources of holiday sadness include fatigue, unrealistic expectations, family conflict, stress of managing traditions, financial burdens and the emotional stress that accompanies memories of past holidays or lost loved ones. Holiday stress can be summed up in one word: Demands! Everywhere we turn, someone needs something! Time, money, donations, a side-dish for the church pot-luck, a gift for the gift exchange, freshly baked cookies for Santa... somewhere in the midst of all those demands, we can lose sight of what really matters.

The good news is- you can manage holiday stress and avoid the "holiday blues." Consider these helpful hints to stay sane during the holiday season!

**Acknowledge your Feelings:** If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's important to express your feelings. Don't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

**Reach Out:** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events or volunteer your time to help others in need.

**Be Realistic:** The holidays don't have to be perfect or look exactly like they did when you were a child, or even like they did last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Be flexible with tradition and expectations.

**Set Aside Differences:** Remember, sometimes, loving someone means accepting them for exactly who they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time to work through them.

**Stick to a Budget:** Be realistic about what you can afford, and set limits for yourself when grocery or gift shopping.

**Learn to Say No:** Know your limits and don't take on more than you can handle.

**Hang on to Healthy Habits:** Maintain a normal routine during the holiday season whenever possible. Continue to eat healthy, and get plenty of sleep and physical activity.

**Slow Down and Enjoy:** Don't let all of the preparing, cooking and wrapping take away from the time spent with family and loved ones. Relax and bring the focus back to what really matters.

COUNSELING AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES

www.CompassCounselingDbq.com • (563) 564-4114 • 3435 Asbury Road, Suite 125 Dubuque, IA



# Managing Holiday Stress

## Seasonal Affective Disorder

Sometimes, the stress we feel during the holiday months isn't just a case of the "holiday blues." Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a commonly overlooked form of depression that affects many Americans. Symptoms of SAD typically occur during the fall and winter months, when the reduced level of sunlight disrupts your body's internal clock. Likewise, diminished exposure to sunlight may cause a drop in serotonin, a chemical in your brain that affects mood, leading to symptoms of depression. For most, these fall and winter months also mean a busy holiday season, leading many individuals to inaccurately attribute their symptoms of depression to holiday stress.

Symptoms of this common form of depression include sadness, loss of energy, anxiety, hopelessness, isolation, irritability, changes in appetite, loss of interest in activities, difficulty concentrating, sudden weight gain/loss, insomnia or exhaustion. Symptoms can appear with the change of seasons, onset of the holidays, or at the beginning of the New Year.

These symptoms can lead to further complications including social withdrawal, school or work problems, suicidal behavior and substance abuse. Substance abuse is particularly concerning around the holiday season when overindulgence is common. It is important to note that alcohol is a depressant and can increase or cause symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as add to financial, emotional, and physical stress.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is common in both men and women, however, it is estimated that between 60% and 90% of people with SAD are female. If you have concerns that you or someone you love may be suffering from this disorder talk to your family doctor or encourage your loved one to do so. Seasonal Affective Disorder can be severe, and treatment should be monitored by professionals; however, there are ways to manage symptoms of SAD at home:

- Increase your exposure to natural sources of light during the fall and winter months; open blinds and curtains, sit near sunny windows, trim trees that may be blocking direct sunlight from your home.
- Exercise regularly; physical exertion reduces stress and anxiety and can increase mood and self-esteem.
- Spend time outside when able; take a short walk, eat your lunch outside, or spend time at a local park. Even on cold and cloudy days, exposure to outdoor light can help.
- Encourage your family to maintain a normal routine through the winter and holiday season that includes regular, well-balanced meals, exercise, steady sleep habits, and time for relaxation.

### WE ARE HERE FOR YOU!

Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling sad or anxious, irritable and hopeless this holiday season. If these symptoms begin to interfere with your daily life, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. For more information or to schedule an appointment please call (563) 564-4114.