

**MAKING IT THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS
WHEN YOU'RE IN THE DARK PLACE OF
DEPRESSION**

**By James Donaldson
Former NBA All-Star
&**

Author of Celebrating Your Gift of Life

A personal note from James Donaldson
Author of Celebrating Your Gift of Life:
From the Verge of Suicide to a Life of Purpose and Joy

I wanted to take a moment to address the readers of this e-book.

This e-book is a compilation of articles that I have come across recently pertaining to helping those who are having mental issues successfully get through the holidays.

As someone who had a serious bout of mental health challenges myself, and 2018, I know from first-hand experience, how difficult and challenging it is to face the holiday season of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's.

Try as you might, to get engaged and to feel the joy and fulfillment that so many others do, when you're in that deep dark place of depression, it's almost impossible to do.

And so, these articles are filled with a lot of great steps on how to help you make it through the holiday season.

Also, I encourage you to purchase a copy of my book, Celebrating Your Gift of Life, which chronicles my personal experiences of dealing with anxiety, depression and suicidal ideations that lasted approximately 12 months. I made it through, by taking the appropriate steps and sticking to it, even though it was one of the most difficult and challenging experiences of my life.

But, the bottom line is, I made it through and I'm still here to tell my story.

If you would like a personally signed copy of my book, please order it directly from my website which is www.celebratingyourgiftoflife.com

Those orders, as compared to other online orders where you may find the book, come directly to me, and I personally write an uplifting positive message in the book to you or whoever it is you would like me to sign the book to. I also, personally package it for you, and send it directly back to you from my home offices here.

Enjoy this e-book and all the great information it contains.

It will pertain not only for the holiday season, but all year round at some point.

Thank you so much, and I wish you all the best, and I encourage each and everyone to get out there and Celebrate Your Gift of Life the best you can.



Blessings and all the best to you,
James Donaldson

AN NBA ALL-STAR OPENS UP ABOUT HIS MENTAL HEALTH JOURNEY

CELEBRATING YOUR GIFT OF LIFE

FROM THE VERGE OF SUICIDE TO A LIFE OF PURPOSE AND JOY



JAMES DONALDSON

FOUNDER OF YOUR GIFT OF LIFE FOUNDATION

Order your personally signed copy today at www.celebratingyourgiftoflife.com



James Donaldson, Former NBA All-Star Basketball Player
and Author of
Celebrating Your Gift of Life: From The Verge of Suicide to a Life of Purpose and Joy

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This Is How I Keep My Depression in Check During the Holidays

Health and wellness touch each of us differently. This is one person's story.



When I think about the holidays, the first things that come to mind are: joy, generosity, and being surrounded by loved ones.

But the truth is, that's not how my holiday actually goes. And while this time of year is one that I remember enjoying when I was a child, it's an occasion I would rather skip now. That's because, when I reflect further, different feelings and emotions start to appear:

Anxiety, fear, panic, and depression.

While I love to give gifts to loved ones, the thought of not picking out *the perfect one* makes me want to burst into tears. So I always go overboard. And when I log on to my social media handles and see couples going on holiday outings, I realize how alone I actually feel.

the perfect one

It's as if any prior months of progress don't matter and I'm just an inch away from reverting back to my deepest lows. My anxiety and depression go to new highs during the holidays. And as I try to hold myself together, I can't control how irritable I become to others. Trying to hold it in on a regular day is difficult enough, let alone on days when you feel especially overwhelmed. I begin to question my progress, my medications, my counselors, and how appreciated I am by my "loved ones."

These are the times where I want to be left alone and have no interaction with anybody, just to unwind.

My strategies for coping

The last two holiday seasons were by far the hardest I've had to deal with. I was going through a breakup, while simultaneously hiding my battle with anxiety and depression. And to top it off, I wasn't feeling very connected to my friends or family.

Thankfully, this year I am changing the way I deal with my anxiety, panic, and depression. How? By remembering that, even though during the holidays you're expected to give back and give joy to others, you simply cannot disregard your own mental health.

After talking to my counselor many times about **self-care tricks**, I'm learning to manage my well-being by not striving for perfection over the holidays. These are some of the tricks that are helping to keep me on track!

1. Focus less on details

My anxiety can feel beyond overwhelming, and this is partly because I need everything to be picture-perfect. When I say everything, I really mean *every single detail*. I think that if the details aren't just right, the whole holiday will go wrong. This year I am going to focus less on the details, and more on the memories that everyone takes away from the holiday.

So I have written down a plan to help relieve some of that anxiety. I am making cookies with my favorite person, which in my case is my mom. We will be making this a fun occasion with a capital **F**. Having someone distract me from decorating the cookies will allow me to enjoy the activity instead of dread it!

2. Avoid social media

Dealing with depression over the holidays is awful. I feel like it's better for me to stay inside and isolate myself, rather than impose on anyone's holiday plans. But when I do this, I end up on all of my favorite social media sites and fall into a worsened mental state. This year, I took a vow to focus more on my *own* holiday, instead of comparing it to all the people I follow on social media.

own

By not comparing my holiday to others, I won't feel the constant pressure to make my holiday details perfect. The way I'm planning on doing this is by staying out of the social media hole. I'm deleting the apps from my phone, so I'm only able to access them through my home computer. This will give me more time to enjoy the company of those around me, and help me steer clear of deep lows.

3. Take some 'me' time

I am very grateful to be surrounded by loved ones during the holidays. Doing things that are a little more relaxing is a great way to reduce anxiety and depression. Having said that, it is so important to take time for yourself. So I'm making it a huge priority this year to relax and unwind by focusing on my mental health.

I plan on working on things that make me feel happy and relaxed. Painting, photography, reading, writing, and walking are just some of the things I will be doing during my downtime, away from everybody. I think this is essential, because during the holidays it's busy! Whether it's gift shopping, holiday traditions, or people visiting from out of town, I find myself constantly surrounded by people. While that is a wonderful thing, it's also important to do some relaxing by yourself.

I think it's not only crucial to notice when you need time alone, but also to communicate to others that you need some downtime to clear your mind of the **holiday stress**.

This year I'm devoted to making the holidays feel special again. To actually feel the "magic" of the holidays that everyone talks about, instead of falling into my major lows of depression and anxiety. These tips will help allow me to enjoy the people around me, and enjoy my own company as well. Here's to taking control!

*If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety, reach out to your doctor for support and treatment options. There are numerous forms of support available to you. Check out our **mental health resources page** for more help.*

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*Brittany Ann is a professional interior stylist and lifestyle mental health advocate. Originally from a small city in Saskatchewan, she moved to Calgary where she realized her passion was design. So, she started a blog, **The Beauty & Design**, which eventually led to a career in freelance writing and interior styling. Connect with her on her **Instagram** or **blog**.*

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14 Tips to Beat Holiday Depression, According to Psychologists



There are ways to make the most wonderful time of year a little better.

6 Tips to Avoid Holiday Depression Triggers

The holiday season isn't wonderful for everyone. For some, holiday depression makes this time of year debilitating, and difficult to experience. In this episode of Deep Dives, we speak with Gail Saltz, M.D. regarding holiday depression and seasonal depression, and her take on how to manage stress during this time of year. Here are six tips to help avoid potential triggers and keep holiday depression at bay.

What is depression—and does it really get worse during the holidays?



While holiday depression is not an official clinical diagnosis, the holiday season is full of potential depression triggers. "Depression that occurs around the holidays sometimes gets called holiday depression," Gail Saltz, MD, a psychologist and host of the [Personology podcast](#), tells *Health*. "It is important to delineate whether this occurs every year in the winter, because if so this may actually be **seasonal affective disorder**. But if not, it may be depression exacerbated by stressors related to the holidays."

Make plans ahead of time



Spend some time figuring out how to take care of yourself during this time, John Sharp, MD, a psychiatrist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, tells *Health*.

Come up with restorative routines, such as reading a book or napping, and write them on a calendar. In between shopping and baking, make sure these routines don't fall by the wayside.

"Figure out what basics are going to help you get through the holidays and make them a priority," Dr. Sharp says.

Avoid family conflict as much as possible



There are a couple ways to save your sanity at family gatherings, Jeffrey Greeson, PhD, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University School of Medicine in Durham, N.C., tells *Health*.

If you know there are going to be conflicts, prepare a neutral response, such as, "Let's talk about that another time," or, "I can see how you would feel that way."

Then escape to the restroom, offer to help in the kitchen, or go hang out with the kids. And it always helps to call a good friend if you need a sympathetic ear.

Focus on the good



Specifically, focus on the good *people* in your life. The holidays can be immensely stressful if you don't see eye-to-eye with your family members and yet end up spending large amounts of time with them (especially if you're all staying under one roof).

If this scenario is stressful for you, it's extra important to think about the people and things that *don't* stress you out during this time. "That's where we should put our energy," Scott Bea, PsyD, a psychologist at Cleveland Clinic, tells *Health*.

"Let things be less than ideal. Let them feel a little broken," Dr. Bea says. However, make it a point to intentionally focus on people in your life who "lift you up."



Debbie Thurman, a 57-year-old from Monroe, Va., suffered from depression for years, and the holidays made it worse. From decorating to finding the perfect gifts, she felt overwhelmed.

At a support group's suggestion, she listed the simple things that really made her family happy, and she began traditions that helped the less fortunate.

"When you take your eyes off of yourself and focus on those who have far less than you do, you can't be depressed," she says. "I learned to be grateful for the blessings I had, and I had a lot."



Your Gift of Life Foundation

Support and Encouragement for
Mental Health Awareness and Suicide
Prevention



If you are mourning a loved one, it's a good time to talk about your feelings or reach out to support groups.

"There's no one right way to feel," Deborah Jonsson, public relations manager at Avow Hospice, in Collier County, Florida, tells *Health*. It's not uncommon to feel angry at the person for leaving you alone or feeling guilty if you do enjoy yourself during the holidays.

Health

"All feelings are a sign that you're human and reflect where you are in your healing process," Jonsson says.

Get enough sleep



Holiday activities easily can interfere with your sleep schedule. But studies have shown there is a link between sleep loss and depression, so you need to be extra careful about cutting back on sleep to get everything done.

Try to get to bed and wake up at approximately the same time every day; avoid large meals and physical activity such as dancing within a few hours of bedtime; and make your bedroom a sleep sanctuary, free from TV or other distractions, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Limit media consumption



Let's be real—the holidays can make you feel lonely. Advertising campaigns showing happy couples and family units can really do a number on you if you're depressed. "If you're depressed, [what you're feeling] is in contrast to what appears to be going on everywhere else," explains Dr. Bea.

Social media (and other types of media), can often emphasize feelings of loneliness, which is why you need to be mindful of how much of said media you're consuming. If you get sad when you log onto Facebook, pay attention to that feeling, and consider changing your media consumption habits.

"You have to have a plan. Rather than merely being victimized, have a plan on how you're going to approach this. Limit the degree to which social media" has power over your feelings, says Dr. Bea.

Don't be afraid to ask for help



When Thurman's children were young, she and her husband lived far away from their extended family. When she needed support during "black bouts of depression," she leaned on close friends.

She and her husband had two couples in particular that helped them through difficult times. "These friends were godsend," she says.

"I credit them with quite possibly helping to save my life," she says. "I also drew encouragement from a small support group of women who were dealing with depression."

Make exercise a priority



Exercise—one of the first activities to get lost in the holiday shuffle—should be placed high on your to-do list.

"The more stress we are under, the less time we feel like we have, and the more irritated our mood, the more we need to continue exercising," Greeson says. "Get out and do something; it helps use those calories from rich, fatty, sugary holiday foods."

Exercise has been shown to improve mood. Taking a brisk walk for 35 minutes five days a week (or 60 minutes three times a week) can do the trick.

Consider your light exposure



If you are consistently tired, irritable, and down at this time of year, it may not be due to the holidays as much as to the lack of exposure to the sun, Dr. Sharp says.

Seasonal affective disorder, or SAD, can be treated by long walks during daylight hours or exposure to a light box for about 30 minutes a day.

If you think you may be suffering from SAD, talk to your doctor about treatment options.

Focus on what really matters



The holidays shouldn't be all about the presents, but financial woes can make it easy to lose sight of that.

Rein in the stress (and cost) by organizing a gift exchange with friends or family. You can also bake your gifts, or create traditions such as having a large potluck meal followed by a walk outside or board games by the fire.

"I think saying no is more of a relief instead of stretching and spending more than you have and still not doing enough," Dr. Sharp says.

Don't binge on food or alcohol



For some, overindulgence is as much of a holiday tradition as opening gifts. Carmen Harra, PhD, an author and psychologist in Hollywood, Florida, recommends more restraint.

"Have one piece of pie, not three," Dr. Harra tells *Health*. "Apart from being unhealthy for your body, you will feel guilty afterward."

Harra recommends preparing for holiday dinners by eating healthy meals the week prior. And don't use alcohol to deal with holiday depression. Alcohol can intensify your emotions and leave you feeling worse when it wears off.

Cut back on commitments



If you feel like you just can't get through one more holiday gathering, it's OK to sit them out.

"One of the things about **holiday stress** we forget is that Thanksgiving and Christmas are both 24 hours and that's it," Pauline Wallin, PhD, an author and clinical psychologist in Camp Hill, Penn, tells *Health*.

Health

Wallin recommends figuring out what you need to get through those 24 hours, such as volunteering, going on vacation, or visiting a shelter or someone who is alone. Focusing on others can help alleviate depression.

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays often present a dizzying array of demands — cooking meals, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few. And if coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is spreading in your community, you may be feeling additional stress, or you may be worrying about your and your loved ones' health. You may also feel stressed, sad or anxious because your holiday plans may look different during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

Take control of the holidays

Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.

25 Ways to Find Joy and Balance During the Holidays

Feeling down during the holidays can be tough.

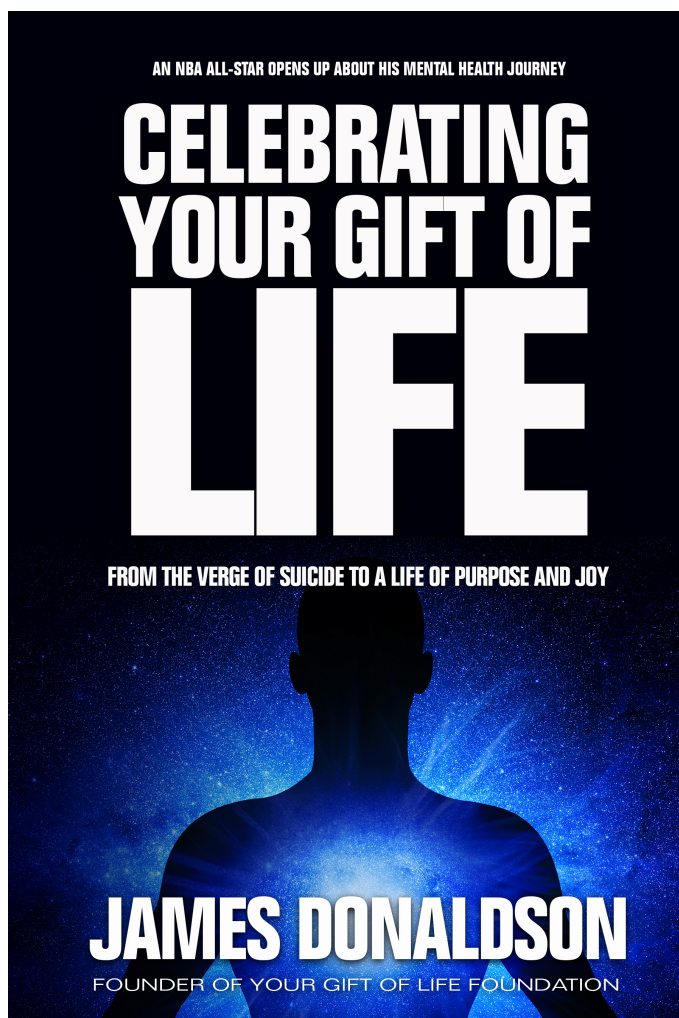
From the WebMD Archives

Feeling down during the holidays can be tough, especially since you seem so out of step with the world. Everyone else seems to be beaming, ruddy-cheeked, bursting with holiday spirit. You're feeling wretched and exhausted.

But here's something to cheer you up the next time you're stuck in a room of revelers at a holiday party: Plenty of them are probably unhappy, too.

"I think a lot of people would say that the holidays are the worst time of the year," says Ken Duckworth, MD, medical director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "They're just straight up miserable, and that's not only for people with **clinical depression**."

So if the family gatherings, the endless parties, and the shopping get you down, you're hardly alone. But people with depression -- or who have had **depression** in the past -- need to be especially careful when coping with holiday stress. While it might take some conscious effort on your part, you can reduce stress -- and maybe even find some holiday joy, too. Here are some tips.



Finding the Holiday Spirit: Emotions

1. Keep your expectations modest. Don't get hung up on what the holidays are supposed to be like and how you're supposed to feel. If you're comparing your holidays to some abstract greeting card ideal, they'll always come up short. So don't worry about holiday spirit and take the holidays as they come.

supposed supposed

2. Do something different. This year, does the prospect of the usual routine fill you with holiday dread rather than holiday joy? If so, don't surrender to it. Try something different. Have Thanksgiving at a restaurant. Spend Christmas day at the movie theater. Get your family to agree to skip gifts and instead donate the money to a charity.

3. Lean on your support system. If you've been depressed, you need a network of close friends and family to turn to when things get tough, says David Shern, PhD, president and CEO of Mental Health America in Alexandria, Va. So during the holidays, take time to get together with your support team regularly -- or at least keep in touch by phone to keep yourself centered.

4. Don't assume the worst. "I think some people go into the holidays with expectations so low that it makes them more depressed," says Duckworth. So don't start the holiday season anticipating disaster. If you try to take the holidays as they come and limit your expectations -- both good and bad -- you may enjoy them more.

5. Forget the unimportant stuff. Don't run yourself ragged just to live up to holiday tradition. So what if you don't get the lights on the roof this year? So what if you don't get the special Christmas mugs from the crawl space? Give yourself a break. **Worrying** about such trivial stuff will not add to your holiday spirit.

6. Volunteer. Sure, you may feel stressed out and booked up already. But consider taking time to help people who have less than you. Try volunteering at a soup kitchen or working for a toy drive. "You could really find some comfort from it," says Duckworth, "knowing that you're making a small dent in the lives of people who have so little."

Finding the Holiday Spirit: Family

7. Head off problems. Think about what people or situations trigger your holiday stress and figure out ways to avoid them. If seeing your uncle stresses you out, skip his New Year's party and just stop by for a quick hello on New Year's Day. Instead of staying in your bleak, childhood bedroom at your stepfather's house, check into a nearby hotel. You really have more control than you think.

8. Ask for help -- but be specific. See if your spouse will lug out the decorations. Ask your sister to help you cook -- or host the holiday dinner itself. Invite a friend along on shopping trips. People may be more willing to help out than you expect; they just need some guidance from you on what to do.

9. Don't worry about things beyond your control. So your uncle and your dad get into a fight every holiday dinner and it makes you miserable. But remember your limits. You can't control them. But you can control your own reaction to the situation.

10. Make new family traditions. People often feel compelled to keep family holiday traditions alive long past the point that anyone's actually enjoying them. Don't keep them going for their own sake. "Start a new holiday tradition instead," says Gloria Pope, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy at the **Depression** and Bipolar Support Alliance in Chicago. "Create one that's more meaningful to you personally."

11. Find positive ways to remember loved ones. Holidays may remind you of the loved ones who aren't around anymore. But instead of just feeling glum, do something active to celebrate their memory. For instance, go out with your sisters to your mom's favorite restaurant and give her a toast.

Finding the Holiday Spirit: Parties

12. Don't overbook. "The holidays last for weeks and weeks," says Pope. "People really need to pace themselves or they'll get overwhelmed." So don't say yes to every invitation willy-nilly. Think about which parties and you can fit in -- and which ones you really want to attend.

13. Don't stay longer than you want. Going to a party doesn't obligate you to stay until the bitter end. Instead, just drop by for a few minutes, say hello, and explain you have other engagements. The hosts will understand that it's a busy time of year and appreciate your effort. Knowing you have a plan to leave can really ease your anxiety.

14. Have a partner for the party. If the prospect of an office party is causing holiday stress, talk to a friend and arrange to arrive -- and leave -- together. You may feel much better knowing you have an ally and a plan of escape.

Finding the Holiday Spirit: Shopping

15. Forget about the perfect gift. If you're already feeling overwhelmed, now is not the time to fret about finding the absolute best gift ever for your great aunt or your mailman. Remember: everybody likes a gift certificate.

16. Shop online. Save yourself the inconvenience, the crowds, and the horrors of the mall parking lot by doing the bulk of your shopping online.

17. Stick to a budget. The cost of holiday shopping mounts quickly and can make people feel out of control and anxious. So draw up a budget long before you actually start your shopping and stick to it.

Finding the Holiday Spirit: Self-Care

18. Stay on schedule. As much as you possibly can, try to stick with your normal routine during the holidays. Don't stay too late at parties. Don't pull an all-nighter wrapping presents. Disrupting your schedule and losing out on sleep can make your mood deteriorate.

19. Exercise. While you may not feel like you have the time to exercise during the holidays, the benefits are worth it. "We know that exercise has a pretty strong anti-anxiety, anti-depression effect," says Duckworth. You can work physical activity into your errands. When you're shopping, take a few extra laps around the mall. Walk your Christmas cards to the post office instead of driving.

20. Eat sensibly. When you're facing a dozen holiday parties and family gatherings between now and New Year's, it's hard to stay committed to a sensible diet. But try. Eating healthy may keep you feeling better -- physically and emotionally. On the other hand, don't beat yourself up if you go overboard on the cookie platter in the break room. It's not a big deal. Just get back on track the next day.

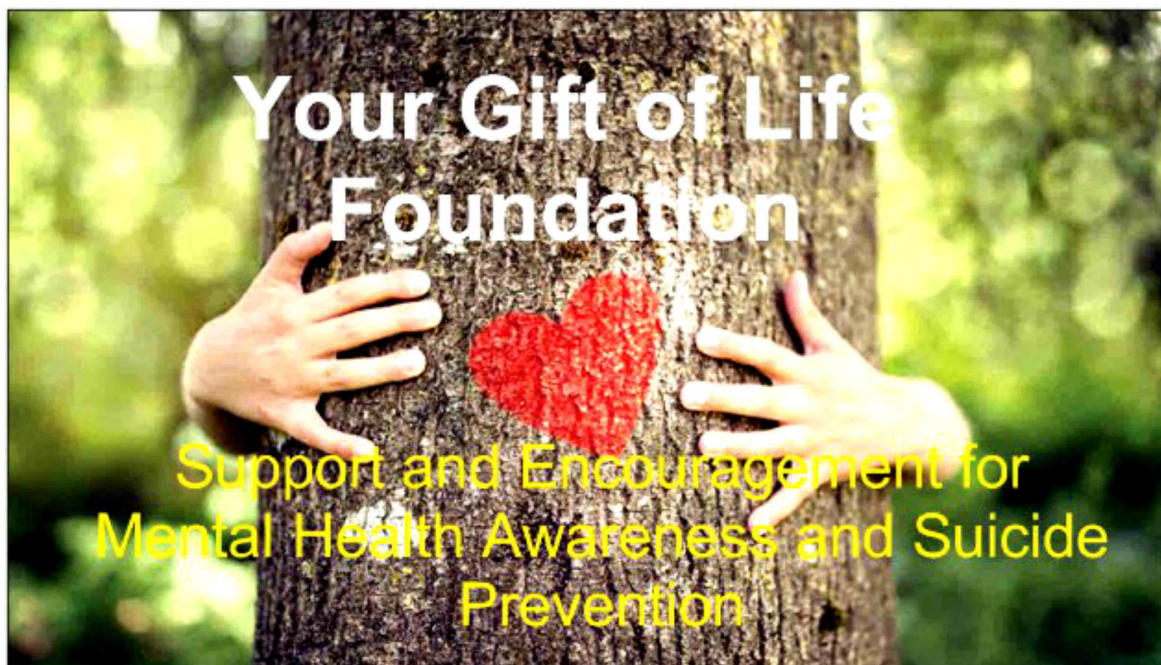
21. Don't rely on holiday spirits (or other substances.) "The holidays are a time of heavy drinking," says Duckworth. "It's a common strategy for getting over anxiety about holiday parties or having the boss as your Secret Santa." Remember that alcohol is itself a depressant and abusing it will leave you feeling worse. It also may not be safe for people taking antidepressant medication, says Pope.

22. Try a sun lamp. As the daylight grows shorter, lots of people find their mood gets gloomier. While some have diagnosed **seasonal affective disorder** (SAD), even people who don't may still have a seasonal aspect to their depression. Talk to your doctor about trying a sun lamp. It could improve your mood.

23. If you take medication, don't miss doses. In the hustle of the holidays, it's easy to slack off and miss medication, says Pope. Don't let that happen. Make sure that you're up-to-date on your refills, too.

24. If you see a therapist, have extra meetings. To stay grounded, plan ahead and schedule some extra sessions during the holiday season. Or you could ask about the possibility of doing quick phone check-ins.

25. Give yourself a break. "The holidays can make some people dwell on their imperfections, their mistakes, the things they're not proud of," Duckworth tells WebMD. But try to cut yourself some slack. "This is not an easy time of year for a lot of people," Duckworth says. "Be gentle with yourself." It is the season of kindness and forgiveness, after all. Save some of it for yourself.





Tips for Enjoying Holidays with Anxiety or Depression

The holidays are supposed to be a time where everyone is happy and cheerful. But for some people, it can be the most stressful time of the year due to **anxiety** or **depression**. If you're battling either of these conditions, these tips for enjoying the holiday season can help you regain clarity and strengthen your mental health.



When you are suffering from **anxiety** or depression this holiday season, try to:

- Stay in contact with friends and family members who can provide you with emotional support
- Actively participate in activities, such as volunteering, to keep yourself busy with a sense of purpose
- Get plenty of rest so that your energy levels remain high
- Take care of your physical health by eating well and exercising regularly
- Stay organized so tasks aren't overwhelming at home or work
- Set realistic expectations for yourself and others around you
- Have a plan in place so that if symptoms become more severe, they can be addressed quickly

How to Unwind this Holiday Season

Don't Be Afraid to Say No

With so much happening during the holidays, it can be very easy to become overwhelmed. By understanding your limits, you can be sure not to over schedule yourself. Remember, it is okay not to accept every holiday invitation you receive. Eliminating traditions that cause you more stress than joy can help relieve some anxiety you may be having.

Try to avoid large crowds where you can, and do not shy away from telling friends or family members that you need a break. Remember that you are not alone, and there is always someone to talk to if the holiday season becomes more than you can handle on your own.

Take Time for You

Be sure to start preparing for the holidays well in advance, but incorporate self-care into your plans. For example, taking the time to relax, reading a book, or meditating can all help lower feelings of anxiety or depression. Also, don't forget to make time for your hobbies, even if it's only for a few minutes during the day.

Furthermore, while it may be tempting during the holidays, avoid looking for relief in alcohol or other drugs, as this may further trigger your anxiety and depression.

What Leads to Holiday Depression and Anxiety?

Many factors such as excessive commitments, financial pressure, travel, and unrealistic expectations can cause anxiety and depression to worsen during the holidays. In addition, some people may feel anxious or depressed during the winter holidays due to [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), sometimes referred to as seasonal depression.

Prepare a Budget

When feeling financial pressure over the holidays, it is best to create a spending plan. When budgeting for the holidays, be sure to include things like gifts, travel plans, parties, and any other cost you may incur during the season. By coming up with a spending plan, you can mitigate many surprises and stay in control of your spending.

How to get through the holidays when you're depressed

Everyone around you seems to be celebrating, but you've got a bad case of the holiday blues. Here's how to cope.

Forget being jolly. Some years, the holidays feel like more of a burden than a blessing.

While those around you seem to be living out a Hallmark Christmas movie, you're mired in grief or sadness. And, on top of that, you're supposed to smile through the office holiday party, find the perfect Secret Santa gift, rack up bills for holiday shopping, and head home to your relatives around the holiday table.

"Part of it is this disconnect between the feeling that you're supposed to be the happiest ever or super-festive and the belief that sort of everybody is and then you feel totally removed from that," says psychoanalyst **Gail Saltz**, associate professor of psychiatry at the NY Presbyterian Hospital Weill-Cornell School of Medicine and author of ***The Power of Different: The Link Between Disorder and Genius***.

The Power of Different: The Link Between Disorder and Genius.

The good news is that there are some coping mechanisms that can help.

Know You're Not Alone

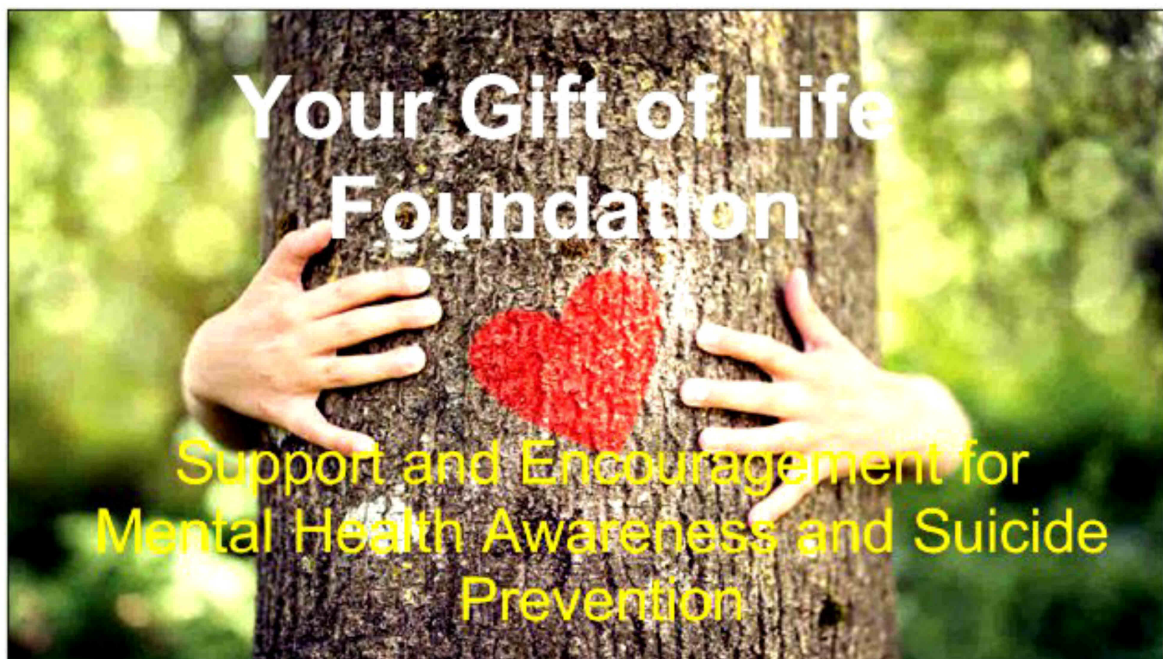
Whether you've experienced a loss that is weighing on you or you're simply not feeling all that festive, the holiday blues are common. **One study by the American Psychological Association (APA)** found that 44% of women and 31% of men report increased stress during the holidays due to issues such as lack of time and money and pressure to give or get gifts.

Plan Your Travels Carefully

Holiday travel can bring added stress and contribute to your depression and anxiety. Try to avoid traveling during the most hectic times, such as when there is a lot of traffic on the road. While holiday travel may be unavoidable for some, staying with loved ones who live close by can help reduce your stress and [travel anxiety](#). When traveling over the holidays, always plan early. Allow plenty of time for organizing and packing before your trip, and be sure to double-check all reservations before you go.

Contact Mile High Psychiatry

[Mile High Psychiatry](#) is dedicated to helping you become the best version of yourself through a combination of psychotherapy and cognitive tools. If you or a loved one is dealing with anxiety or depression this holiday season, book an appointment with Mile High Psychiatry [here](#) or call us at (855) 270-4471.



Another study by the National Alliance on Mental Illness found that 64% of people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness say that the holiday season between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day makes their condition "somewhat" or "a lot" worse. The "holiday blues" are often caused by high expectations, loneliness, and stress. Just understanding that you're not the only person feeling this way can alleviate some of the loneliness you feel, Saltz says.

Give Yourself Permission to Say "No"

You don't have to attend every holiday party or engage in competitions to buy the biggest or best gifts. It's okay to be choosy about the holiday madness in which you participate, says psychologist and coach **Ashley B. Hampton**. And you can also ease yourself into obligations. Let's say you're expected to go to the office holiday party. You might put parameters on how long you'll stay—plan to go for 30 minutes, then see how you're feeling, for example.

At the same time, when you're feeling blue, sometimes it's tempting to isolate yourself, when the best thing for you might be to get out and have a little fun, she says. "If it's something they think they may like, go for it," she says. But having the option to leave early or not go at all can sometimes shift the situation from an obligation to a choice, which can remove some of the stress.

Find a "Wing Person"

If you're dealing with another holiday networking luncheon that you must attend, bring a plus-one to run interference for you, Saltz suggests. If you've confided in your **best friend at work** or another trusted colleague, enlist that person as moral support if you need it. They may be able to provide a distraction at an office party or help you find an appropriate excuse to leave when you need to do so.

Make New Traditions

Just because you've done it before doesn't mean you have to do it again. It's okay to skip the gift exchange this year or make 10 different kinds of cookies, Saltz says. Scale back your long, holiday-related to-do list. You may even find new traditions. Instead of cooking and hosting a meal for your entire family or friend group, have everyone bring their favorite dish, for example. If other people around you are feeling sad, too, they may welcome the change of pace.

Watch the Drinking

The APA study found that using food and alcohol to cope with stress increased around the holidays, but significantly more women reported using both to manage their feelings. Saltz warns against that. Alcohol is a depressant and may make you feel worse—especially if you overindulge and end up with a hangover.

When you're feeling sadness or grief, taking care of yourself can help you feel better. Get appropriate rest, eat well, and exercise, she says.

Engage in Some Happy Distractions

What makes you feel good? Whether it's a classic Bruce Springsteen song or cute animal videos, find your go-to option for a quick smile, Hampton says. Even a few minutes of immersing yourself in something that makes you happy can give your mood a boost.

Find Ways to Give Back

Doing something good for others is a great way to focus on something other than your sadness. And studies have shown that being **generous is linked with being happier**. "Being able to channel some of yourself in that direction can actually make you feel a lot better besides the fact that you're making other people feel better," Saltz says.

You can also look for ways for your **coworkers to get involved**. There are often **many ways to give back** this time of year.

Don't Let It Linger Unchecked

And while the holiday blues are common this time of year, getting help for sadness or grief can also offer some relief. If your feelings are interfering with your ability to function, you're having trouble concentrating or performing at work, or your feelings are affecting your well-being or relationships, it may be time to consult a mental health professional or physician to help determine the best options to help you.

About the author

Gwen Moran is a writer, editor, and creator of **Bloom Anywhere**, a website for people who want to move up or move on. She writes about business, leadership, money, and assorted other topics for leading publications and websites



How to Cope With Holiday Stress and Depression

An expert gives advice on managing the holiday blues email



- Seasonal depression. The holidays coincide with the onset of winter, when it gets dark earlier and temperatures plunge. As a result, seasonal depression and **seasonal affective disorder** (SAD) rise at the same time, sometimes impacting the holiday experience.

“People who find themselves in these circumstances sometimes assume that everyone else is having a happy, stress-free holiday,” Dr. Potter notes. “And that can really make what they’re feeling that much more challenging.”

What symptoms and signs should I look for?

Whether you’re familiar with holiday stress and depression or this is the first time you’re really experiencing these emotions, there are a few signs to look for. “Some stress is normal around the holidays,” says Dr. Potter, “but there’s a difference between normal stress symptoms and ones that indicate a significant **anxiety** or **depressive** disorder.”

Dr. Potter says these are four main symptoms that may signal something bigger than normal stress.

- Feeling depressed and hopeless for more days than not.
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy.
- Constantly feeling anxious, nervous or on edge more days than not.
- Trouble sleeping over an extended time.

In addition to these, Dr. Potter urges anyone experiencing thoughts of self-harm or suicide to call the 24/7 **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** 800.273.8255 (or via **chat**). It is a free resource that connects people in crisis to a local counselor. If you feel you’re in immediate danger, go to the hospital or call 911 and your doctor immediately.

How to manage stress and depression during the holidays

As daunting as this all may feel, there are ways to cope and find support and emotional stability to get you through a tough time of year.

Remembering a loved one

Dr. Potter says that finding a way to acknowledge a lost loved one at your holiday get-together can be a positive experience. "Holidays can be more challenging when the loss isn't talked about because it can make that absence seem even stronger," she says. Sharing memories or a toast to the departed might be a bittersweet moment but one that can ultimately help make your holiday a richer experience.

Setting boundaries

Difficult relationships are tested during the holidays, especially when it comes to families, but there are ways you can prepare. "It's okay to decline an invitation or to leave an event early," Dr. Potter says. "Setting those boundaries is important, just be upfront that it's important to you to attend but that you'll be leaving before the end."

"It's okay to say no to attending an event you don't feel comfortable with," she adds. "You can't make everyone happy so just do the best you can. If you're honest and open, it's easier to get through these difficult events feeling like you've done your best and you're more likely to get some enjoyment out of them."

If you're feeling anxious about a large gathering, Dr. Potter advises spending time with those you have good relationships with. "Focus your attention on people you feel comfortable with. And maybe find an ally with whom you can share your feelings of anxiety," she suggests. "They can give you reassurance and help steer around difficult topics of conversation or an awkward interaction."

Staying connected

Whether you're estranged from your family, have to spend the holiday apart from them or don't have much family, you still don't have to be alone during the holidays. Says Dr. Potter, "Family isn't just about the one you're born into, it's also about the people you connect with. Spend time with your chosen family, the people who bring you happiness and joy."

And if you can't be there in person, there are other ways to stay in touch. "Whether it's a phone call or video chat, there are ways you can stay connected," Dr. Potter notes.

"Just remember," she adds, "you aren't obligated to have a perfect holiday and that doesn't make you any less or person or any less valuable to the people in your life."

Participating in charity work

The holidays are time with a multitude of volunteering opportunities, notes Dr. Potter. "Doing some type of charity work or helping out in some way really helps connect with others and can do a long way to easing that loneliness."

Limiting social media use

Social media can **give us a skewed perspective** on the lives of others and, consequently, our own lives at any time of year. But this is particularly true at the holidays, says Dr. Potter. "Remember, what you're seeing on social media is just a highlight reel of someone's holiday. You don't see the sweat and stress that went into it and you can't make assumptions about their level of happiness."

She also says that cutting down on social media can help you cut down on your own stress. "It can relieve you of feeling like you have to live up to something. Remind yourself that the holidays are about connecting, quality time and sharing joy with others and not just one 'perfect' photo."

Seeking support and help

Even if you take some or all of these steps, you may still experience stress, depression and anxiety. A great way to alleviate those feelings is by seeking support. "If you have access to a therapist, be sure to discuss your feelings with them, especially at this time of year," Dr. Potter says. "If you don't have a therapist and think it might be a good idea, you should **consider reaching out**, too."

If you're not sure about therapy, though, you can still find support in a trusted loved one. "Talk to a close family member or friend about what you're going through," she says. "Talking these things through and sharing similar feelings can go a long way to helping you manage your own feelings."

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Guide to Managing Mental Health Around the Holidays

Experts share the best ways to manage if your days aren't all merry and bright

Elvis once crooned about feeling blue at Christmas time—and we're here to tell you: It's perfectly normal to feel that way.

There are a variety of reasons why your days may not be merry and bright around the holiday season. It can be the jam-packed social calendar, deadlines at work, the loss of a loved one, sunless winter days, or all of the above.

According to the American Psychological Association, 38% of people surveyed said their stress increased during the holiday season, which can lead to physical illness, depression, anxiety, and **substance misuse**. The reasons given: lack of time, financial pressure, gift-giving, and family gatherings.

To make matters worse, the **National Alliance on Mental Illness** noted that 64% of individuals living with a mental illness felt that their conditions worsened around the holidays.

However, there are ways in which we can prepare ourselves and hopefully deflect some of the increased stress of the holidays. It's important to realize that we do have more control than we think we do. However, it's equally important to realize that even if we put these ideas into practice and continue to feel overwhelmed or depressed, **professional help is available**.

We've identified six common issues that come up this time of year, as well as suggestions from our mental health experts for ways to address them.

1. You're Lacking the "Holiday Spirit"

Being surrounded by cheeriness can be stigmatizing when you don't feel the same level of enthusiasm as others.

The pressure to be social, happy, and present can make it difficult to speak up if you feel otherwise. You may also feel left out if your spiritual traditions aren't the dominant ones on display this time of year.

What You Can Do About It

- Recognize that you don't need to force yourself to be happy and that it's good to acknowledge feelings that aren't joyful; remember that you are not alone in feeling this way
- Avoid numbing or avoiding feelings by using alcohol or other substances, which worsen anxiety and depression
- If possible, surround yourself with people who feel similarly; celebrate your traditions or create new ones

According to **Elsa Ronningstam, PhD**, a psychologist at McLean Hospital, "It's important to understand that triggers for holiday angst come from many sources. Memories, stressful patterns that seem to occur every holiday, or potential new crises are common triggers," she said.

Ronningstam added that preparing yourself by understanding how different triggers affect you can help **reduce stress**. Additionally, by finding out why you become anxious or sad around the holidays, you may be able to navigate the rest of the season.

Pushing Back Against Feelings of Loneliness



Feeling alone can be especially hard to handle during the holidays. Dr. Lisa Coyne helps us push back against feelings of loneliness.



2. You're Overwhelmed by Grief and Loss

If you are living with grief, loss, trauma, or loneliness, it can be easy to compare your situation to others', which can increase feelings of loneliness or sadness. Take time to check in with yourself and your feelings and have realistic expectations for how the holiday season will be.

If you are dealing with **loss or grief**, gently remind yourself that as circumstances change, traditions will change as well.

What You Can Do About It

If holiday observances seem inauthentic right now, you do not need to force yourself to celebrate. During this time, connect with and plan to check in with a support group, a therapist, a faith community, or friends who understand.

As much as possible, let your loved ones know how they can support you, whether it's helping you with shopping or meeting up for a regular walk. Often, people want to help but don't know what to say or where to start.

3. You're Feeling Pressured to Participate in Activities—and Want No Part of Them

We all have our own personal history with holidays. We dream about the ways the holidays are supposed to be, which can be a dangerous perspective. We get caught up in wanting to do it all, but we can aim to set more realistic expectations for ourselves and others.

What You Can Do About It

- Accept your limitations and be patient with others too
- Try to see others' points of view and recognize that we're all feeling at least a little stressed—especially this year
- Prioritize the most important activities or schedule get-togethers for after the holidays: If you feel overwhelmed by social obligations and what others are asking of you, learn how to be comfortable saying “no”
- Expectations to celebrate holidays in a specific way can bring up old trauma or family conflicts; for self-care, consider outlining your plan for the season
- Speaking of self-care, make a schedule of when you will do your shopping, baking, cleaning—and be sure to schedule time to take care of yourself
- You may choose not to celebrate at all—instead of spending the holidays the way you think you should, you might opt for an activity you actually feel like doing—whether it's making a favorite dish or having a Netflix marathon
- Regardless of your plans, it can be helpful to communicate intentions to friends and family early in the holiday season so everyone knows what to expect

4. You're Stressed About Giving Gifts

According to McLean's **Mark Longsjo, LICSW**, it's very common to get caught up in the commercialization and marketing of the holidays. We can feel stressed about spending on a strained budget or from trying to find just the right gift.

“Advertisers will take advantage of our susceptibility,” Longsjo said, “but we have the ability to put it in perspective and remind ourselves that we are the ones creating that anxiety, and we are the ones who can reduce it.”

Giving to others is not about spending money. And of course, what goes along with setting realistic expectations is maintaining a budget and being transparent.

Consider how much money you can comfortably spend and stick to the amount. If purchasing gifts for everyone is difficult, consider having a Secret Santa or White Elephant exchange to reduce the number of items everyone needs to buy. You can also simply let people know you are unable to give gifts this year.

“It's an old adage, but sometimes personal gifts—like a poem, short story, or framed photo—are the best ones,” Longsjo said.

What You Can Do About It

You can also give the gift of helping a neighbor, a friend, a family member, or a stranger. It's the act of giving that is more important than a present. Our generosity can be a gift to ourselves, because when we focus on others, and less on ourselves, we tend to reduce our anxiety.

5. There's Not Much Sunlight at All, and It's Affecting Your Mood

In the northern hemisphere, the holidays coincide with winter's lack of available sunlight. Less exposure to natural light can lead to new or increased symptoms of depression.

What You Can Do About It

Try to get as much sunlight as possible.

To boost your mood and regulate sleep, schedule outdoor exercise in the middle of the day when the sun is brightest. If you can, work near a window throughout the day. Even outfitting your home with warm, bright lighting can help improve your mood. Many traditions this time of year incorporate candles and twinkling lights for a reason.

If you feel the need to slow your pace and hunker down this time of year, consider reframing the winter months as an opportunity to work on "quieter" projects and activities suited for the indoors, such as writing, knitting, or taking online courses.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a more severe form of the winter blues. According to researchers, the percentage of people in the United States who struggle with SAD ranges from 1.5% in southern Florida to 9% in northern states.

If you feel hopeless, have suicidal thoughts, or changes in appetite and sleep patterns, talk to your doctor. Effective treatments for SAD include light therapy, talk therapy, and medication.

Self-Care Is Important



While it's true that many of us have friends and family to connect with during the holiday season, there's also the danger of becoming isolated. If you are predisposed to depression or anxiety, it can be especially hard to reach out to others.

What To Do About It

Remind yourself of the people, places, and things that make you feel happy. Consider scheduling a regular call or video chat with friends on a weekly or biweekly basis so you don't have to think twice about making the effort.

Take advantage of other ways to connect, including sending out holiday cards and communicating with family and friends by phone, text, email, and social media.

Calming activities, such as reading, meditating, and gratitude journaling, can be helpful if you don't feel comfortable in social situations.

Don't forget about self-care. We know the importance of a balanced diet, moderate exercise, and plenty of sleep, but because there are so many distractions and stressors this time of year, we lose sight of some of the basic necessities. We need to take care of ourselves and pay increased attention to ensuring we fulfill these areas of our lives as we get closer to the holidays.

Should I Talk to a Doctor?

Talk to your mental health professional or your primary care physician if you have been feeling anxious or depressed for more than two weeks, or if the holidays are long gone and you are still feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed.

Do you or a loved one need mental health care or support? McLean Hospital is here to help. Call us now at 877.646.5272 to learn more about treatment for **depression, stress, or anxiety**.

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Thank You