

Holiday Blues: How to Recognize and Overcome It

By Gordon R. Hodas, M.D.

It makes perfect sense that we get sad around the time of certain anniversaries, particularly those that involve the death of a close family member or friend. After all, ours is a culture that is highly mindful of anniversaries, and there is a tangible loss involved. With both positive and negative relationships, the anniversary reactivates our experience of loss and reminds us, symbolically and directly, that the person is gone.

But what about "holiday blues"? Why do some of us get sad during holidays? After all, this is a happy time, with happy symbols, such as tinsel, lights, trees, menorahs, and snow. And, for most of us, the end-of-the-year holidays do not coincide with the anniversary of the death of a loved one. Depression, a clinical disorder, may also worsen during this time of year, but holiday blues should not be confused with depression in that it is less severe, seasonal, and typically time-limited.

There are many reasons for transient sadness, or holiday blues, during the holiday season. Here are some possibilities:

- We may be reminded of earlier holidays that were disappointing. Such memories may go back to childhood.
- We may feel overwhelmed by the task of getting ready, or experience ourselves as the only ones putting out effort.
- We may be forced by circumstances to be around family members or others toward whom we have great ambivalence. The anticipation, or the actual experience, of such contact stresses us, and awareness of our ambivalence and anger may make us feel guilty and sad.
- We may experience a gap between what the holiday time is "supposed to be," and how it actually is for us. The holiday experience need not be devastating to produce sadness, merely a significant disappointment.
- If, in addition, we feel isolated in the presence of those family members who are supposed to provide us comfort, our alienation and subsequent sadness may be heightened.
- Finally, individuals living by themselves and those with limited access to family and friends may experience intense loneliness, heightening their sense of sadness.

A common theme with holiday blues is a sense of loss. We may build up hope and then find ourselves let down, since reality often cannot keep pace with fantasy. As Mary Gordon, in her engrossing reminiscence, *The Shadow Man* (1996), comments, "Hope can be dangerous, in that it (can) lead to the death of hope." Furthermore, if a person judges himself or herself harshly for being sad and concludes that "there is something wrong with me," their sadness may worsen.

What's to be done? Here are some ideas to consider, when dealing with holiday blues:

- Try to develop realistic expectations for the holiday season. If you take on too much, try to lighten the load, or at least pace yourself better. Learn to say no as well as yes, and when to ask for help. Learn to accept and be graceful in response to things beyond your control.

- Draw upon self-knowledge and self-talk. If you have a pattern of being disappointed during the holiday season, remind yourself of this in advance, and recognize some of the potential triggers. If holiday blues revisit you anyway, acknowledge the "old shadow" and carry on.
- Make a list of things that you are genuinely grateful for. This cognitive exercise, and the visual reminder, can have significant impact on your thought processes.
- Target some little hobby or project for yourself, a source of special interest, and pursue it at least a little every day – even for a few minutes. This promotes creativity and a sense of renewal.
- Think about *giving* rather than receiving, but do so unconditionally without the expectation of being acknowledged for your actions. It is usually when we focus on the lack of reciprocity and appreciation from others that we become susceptible to holiday (and other) blues.
- Pay attention to the people and things around you, and allow yourself to “be in the moment.” In doing this, make an intentional decision about what to pay attention to. As stated by Langer (1989), “The effective person...allocates attention wisely, choosing where and when to be mindful.”

Trying to be strengths-based and positive on an intentional basis can be quite helpful, and this type of mindfulness “leads to feelings of control, greater freedom of action, and less burnout” (1989). However, we must also accept that our mind sometimes appears to have “a mind of its own,” and will inevitably wander and even zero in on negativity. Tolerance of this “drift” enables us to experience greater balance, rendering Holiday blues, when present, less central and more under our control.

References

Gordon, M. (1996). *Shadow Man*. New York: Vintage Books.

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