

Managing Merry Mental Madness

Is that what it feels like to you? The holiday season is not always a time of joy, laughter, blissful relaxation, bonding with family and friends or reminiscing about another wonderful year. For many it represents some of the hardest, loneliest, most stressful weeks of the year and you can't wait for things to go back to 'normal' in the new year.

To help you cope through the weeks ahead here are some of the most common holiday triggers and tips to prevent and/or lessen holiday depression, anxiety and stress. Remember, that you always have a choice and there are options available to you.

1 Budget: there are many expenses during the holidays, whether you are buying presents, food, socialising more, or travelling, you may get into the habit of overextending yourself.

● **TIP:** plan a budget for the season and stick to it. Spend only cash or debit cards. Organise a 'secret Santa' where each person buys one gift for a group of friends or family.

2 Family: Not everyone in a family gets along and sometimes there are personality conflicts. Family members are the best at knowing your triggers. They may use guilt trips or pressure you into doing things you don't want to do.

● **TIPS:** be realistic about what you can and cannot do, you don't have to please everyone else, just yourself. Set boundaries with your family and communicate them. Stay for fewer nights

with family if needed, or plan to stay at accommodation nearby (to give yourself a little breathing space). Spend a few hours rather than a few days at a time or take time for yourself during your stay, like a walk or a trip to the shops for a coffee to 'break' the intensity of time together.

3 Overindulging: Activity levels may be slow, with busy schedules ending the work year, social functions or cold weather outdoors. There are many opportunities during the holidays to eat rich food and drink alcohol which can lead to feelings of guilt and shame, and possible weight gain which can lead to depression or frustration.

● **TIPS:** Plan a holiday or schedule time to be active between the activities. Try to practice some self-restraint with the food and drink, but also go easy on yourself and understand that some goals and training schedules may be unrealistic over the holidays.

4 Taking on too much: You may have over-committed yourself or had unrealistic expectations of what you can do.

● **TIPS:** Pace yourself and learn to say NO. Do not take on more than you can handle. Cut out the things that aren't truly important, make a list and prioritise. Let others share the responsibilities during the holiday season.



5 **Loneliness and isolation:** this can be a real concern for many over the holidays.

● **TIPS:** Try to keep busy or active, do a hobby, join a group or club, especially ones with planned interactions. Volunteer at a local charity, church or community centre. It can be very rewarding and you may make friends. It can be hard to express your loneliness to others, but telling friends about your concerns over the holidays may be helpful to you and enlightening to them changing their awareness.

6 **Loss:** Holidays can remind people of lost loved ones.

● **TIPS:** it's ok to acknowledge sadness, and that the holidays won't be the same without them. You don't have to always be brave and put on a smile. It can

be an opportunity to start new traditions or a special time to really appreciate and recognise that lost loved one. You can incorporate the things they loved, be it a hobby, a cause or interest into your new traditions. Spend time with supportive and caring people who understand what you are going through.

7 **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):** This is a type of depression that is related to changes in seasons. The symptoms include tiredness, depression, mood changes, irritability, trouble concentrating, body aches, insomnia, decreased interest in activities and overeating.

● **TIPS:** treatment includes phototherapy (light therapy, especially for the northern hemisphere countries), counselling and

medication. Meditation has also been shown to be an effective treatment. Talking to a mental health professional may be helpful.

8 **Year-end reflection:** as the year comes to a close many of us reflect on what has happened, what was achieved or what has stayed the same. Take stock of things that are going well (which may actually be something that has stayed the same, as you say 'if it ain't broke don't fix it'). Try to be grateful for things that have happened that year and for what you have.

● **TIPS:** Give yourself some credit. Look to the future with optimism, don't set unrealistic New Year goals. Don't even feel the pressure to set goals at all.



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