Tis the Season to Be Jolly???

Ah, the HOLIDAYS! This is supposed to be one of the happiest times of the year. There are plenty of friends and families’ gatherings, lots of delicious food, and magnificent decorations, and holiday cheers. What's not to like about this, right? While some people are feeling joyful and bright, others are struggling to simply make it through the day due to holiday depression. What is holiday depression? Like major depressive disorder, holiday depression is sense of overwhelming sadness, hopelessness, discouragement, or feelings of being “down in the dumps” around the holidays. Some people feel it leading up to the holidays, while others may feel it after the holidays are over. Symptom can vary between each person and the cause can also be different from one person to the next. This is a predictable, genuine human reaction to an annual social ritual.

Some of the major causes of holiday depression include loneliness, recent loss of a loved one, financial strain or money worries, social anxiety, stress, unrealistic expectations, and being in an abusive environment. That said, keeping a firm control over your emotional well-being at this time of the year can be managed. Fortunately, there are many ways to manage your mental health when holiday depression begins to set in. Listed below are six (6) ways of the many ways that can be helpful in managing the upcoming holidays.

1. Don’t Be Afraid to Say “No”

Spreading yourself too thin across multiple family and friends’ gatherings or trying to make your house perfect for holiday functions is just opening the door to overwhelming negative feelings. Therefore, it is okay not to accept every invitation, or opt-out of hosting a gathering yourself. Take this opportunity to engage in individual interactions with family and friends. This is much more manageable.

2. Be Mindful of Your Finances

Holidays can often be the most expensive time of the year. Finances are a leading cause of stress and anxiety, so it is important to keep an eye on your spending. Instead of gift-exchanges, you could consider opting for low-cost activities you can share with loved ones and friends. Stick to a budget!

3. Don’t Rely on Substances and Alcohol

All that “holiday cheer” can come in many different forms, especially alcohol, which is generally available in celebration during this season. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America recommends avoiding substances and alcohol for comfort. While the stress of the holidays can make the possibility of an escape seem appealing, substance use can ultimately worsen mental health issues. If you do feel the need for a relaxation technique, try turning to mindfulness activities and other healthy coping mechanisms such as exercising, journaling, and/or listening to soft music.

4. Step Away for Toxic Conversations

DO NOT ENGAGE in family feuds! There is usually at least one person in the family who wants to engage in conflictual behaviors. Walk away! There is no shame in removing yourself from an uncomfortable situation.

6. Maintain health habits.

Do not overindulge, it will only add to your stress and anxiety. Exercise, rest, and establish a regular sleep schedule to get adequate sleep.

5. Set Realistic Expectations

When it comes to the holidays, you should always know what to expect regarding the season’s effect on your mental health. This is not meant to be pessimistic, but rather to prevent you from getting your hopes too high and assist you in staying as stable as possible.

6. Seek Professional Help

Managing mental health is always a challenge, but the holiday season itself, the struggles can feel particularly isolating. In spite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling continually sad or anxious, suffering with physical ailments, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to engage in routine daily activities. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. You are not alone. There are numerous sources of support and professional mental health services that can help you manage your mental health wellness throughout the year. If needed, call Maryland Crisis Hotline- Call: 1-800-422-0009 for assistance.

**Resources:**

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental health. 5th. ed.*

Washington, D.C.

<https://www.activebeat.com/>

<https://www.lehighcenter.com/depression-2/surviving-the-season-how-to-manage-mental-health-during-the-holidays/>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20047544>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/3508270/>