

Surviving the Christmas blues

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Christmas is a time of strong emotions, reflections on lost loved ones and stress from shopping and preparing for seasonal parties and gatherings.

Throw in the slow economy and shorter days triggering [seasonal affective disorder](#) (SAD) and it shouldn't be surprising that many are beginning to suffer from the [Christmas](#) blues.

"This is the time of the year when people are vulnerable to depression anyway," said Dr. Angelos Halaris, a psychiatrist with the Loyola University Health System. "The holiday season alone is a burden. Add to that the fact that these are difficult times economically. All of these things can help depression gain a foothold in certain individuals."

For most people, no matter the cause, there are some simple things that are known to work well in defeating the doldrums, Halaris said.

"Exercise works. Having replenishing relationships matter. Doing things that you find rewarding and fulfilling is helpful as is attending religious services. Getting plenty of sleep and taking care of yourself works. We all have our limits and learning to live within those limits is important." Halaris said.

For those who have lost a cherished family member or friend, an empty chair at the table or one less present under the tree can be a painful reminder of the one who is missing.

"There are so many traditions associated with the holiday season that it

can be an [emotional](#) roller coaster for someone who has recently suffered a loss,” said Nancy Kiel, bereavement coordinator at Loyola. “Many people wish they could just fast forward through the holidays, but getting through the season is possible if you give yourself permission to be flexible.”

Though there will be difficult moments, Kiel offers a few tips to help make the holidays a little brighter, beginning with acknowledging the loss.

“Start a new tradition to honor and remember your loved one,” Kiel said. “Light a special candle or at dinner have everyone share a favorite memory or all can take part in a loved one’s favorite holiday activity. Do something that would make your loved one smile.”

Kiel also suggests gathering the family together to discuss changing traditions.

“Everyone is feeling the loss, so talk about what you are going to do and be willing to compromise,” Kiel said. “If you don’t like the change you made, next year you can always go back to the way you did it before.”

As for shopping, skip the malls and give gift cards or shop online, Kiel said.

“It’s not just about the presents, but about the presence of caring and supportive people,” Kiel said.

For those feeling overwhelmed by party invitations or social gatherings, remember, you always have the option to not attend, Kiel said.

“You can say no or give yourself some breathing room by asking to RSVP at a later date,” Kiel said. “If you do go, drive yourself. Then you

can leave at your discretion. Also, try to avoid ‘should people’ who say ‘you should do this’ or ‘you should do that.’ ”

For those suffering from SAD, the amount of sunlight will also eventually rebound. The disorder is characterized by depression, exhaustion and lack of interest in people and regular activities and can interfere with a person’s ability to function properly.

“The most common type of this mood disorder occurs during the winter months,” Halaris said. “SAD is thought to be related to a chemical imbalance in the brain, brought on by lack of light due to winter’s shorter days and typically overcast skies.”

Halaris said that a tendency to crave sweets is common with SAD. In addition, social relationships are hindered. Here’s how to reduce the risk of developing SAD in the first place.

“If at all possible, get outside during winter, even if it is overcast,” Halaris said. “Expose your eyes to natural light for one hour each day. At home, open the drapes and blinds to let in natural light. SAD can be effectively treated with light therapy, antidepressant medication and/or psychotherapy.”

There are times, though, when a case of the blues is more serious. When the blues take hold and stay it could be a sign of clinical depression. Signs to look for include low mood lasting more than two weeks, loss of appetite or overeating, changes in energy levels, difficulties in concentrating or thoughts about death or suicide.

“Those things may herald or actually already be major depression and are not symptoms to be ignored,” Halaris said. “You should seek immediate medical attention.”

As far as economy, it's cyclical. No matter how far down it goes, it always recovers eventually.

“People need to know that even in difficult financial times, we have as a nation always rebounded,” Halaris said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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