

Many different factors can trigger holiday depression

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While the severity and causes of holiday depression vary from person to person, low mood or the inability to enjoy things that one would normally enjoy are common. Changes in sleep or appetite may also be experienced. Dr. Erika Saunders, interim chair of psychiatry at Penn State Hershey, says there are some distinct warning signs to watch for. Credit: Chris Koleno

While the holidays are a time of merriment and festivities for many, some people struggle with depression during this time of year.

Dr. Erika Saunders, interim chair of psychiatry at Penn State Hershey, says there are some distinct warning signs to watch for.

"If I'm worried about a friend or a [family](#) member, the first step is to make sure that they feel they have someone that they can talk to and someone who is supportive and on their side," Saunders says.

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In more serious cases, a feeling of hopelessness that may cause social withdrawal and a feeling of giving up is particularly concerning.

"It's important for anyone who is worried about a friend or family member experiencing these symptoms to encourage them to seek medical attention if it gets to the point of interfering with social functions, work or school," she says. "Anyone having thoughts of death or suicide needs to seek [medical attention](#)."

For those in a slump because of the holidays, it's important to stay connected with friends and family, engage in activities that are fun and relaxing, keep a regular exercise and sleep routine, and limit use of alcohol.

Expressing sadness during this time of year does not necessarily mean a [depressive disorder](#).

"At the holidays, we tend to remember people we've lost, and that can

bring up a range of emotions," she says. "People are more vulnerable at the holidays to experiencing a [major depressive episode](#) if they have depression in their family or if they've experienced it before in their lives."

Many people may just feel emotional stress and strain. The extra tasks of preparing for family gatherings added to an already busy daily routine can add to the stress.

Money woes, divorce and geographical separation from family may also contribute to depression.

Seasonal affective disorder can also be a consideration.

"For some people, the change in the amount of sunlight per day can be an important factor in triggering depression and it can hit around the holidays as well," Saunders says. She suggests talking to a primary care provider about ways to treat [seasonal depression](#), such as light therapy.

Treatment for depression in general may involve psychotherapy or possibly medication.

Saunders says antidepressants can be very helpful when experiencing symptoms severe enough to interfere with life.

"Treatments are available and can often prove helpful. A good place to start would be to talk with a doctor."

More information: Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance:
www.dbsalliance.org/

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: www.afsp.org/

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