HOW TO PREVENT OR MANAGE THE HOLIDAY BLUES

Experiencing the “holiday blues” year after year can be like enduring the dreadful visit people are facing, dealing with the demands and pressures of the holidays may seem more daunting than ever.

Preparing in advance can make a difference, however. Although an ounce of prevention may not magically make problems disappear, it can certainly help make the holidays meaningful and manageable. Here’s a list of “Do’s and Don’ts” that can be helpful:

DO: Follow the three basic rules of good physical and emotional health:

- **Eat right** – It’s true: you are what you eat. Proper nutrition can make a remarkable difference in how well your body and mind function. Eating right also involves taking your time to actually enjoy food. Your body and brain need to take in the aroma, color, texture and taste of food to experience satisfaction and fullness.
- **Get enough rest** – Neither your body nor your mind will be able to perform if you don’t get eight to nine hours of quality sleep at night.
- **Exercise** – Regular exercise is needed for stress release, weight management, and brain stimulation. Exposure to the sun for 15-20 minutes a day during exercise is also beneficial.

DO: Set realistic goals for yourself and your family:

- **Organize and manage your time** – Planning ahead and prioritizing is essential to keeping your stress level low. It also helps in creating feelings of self-efficiency and being in control of your life. Additionally, you can save money in gas, and unnecessary expenditures.
- **Be selective regarding holiday activities** - Not all good activities are best. People can enjoy fewer activities that are meaningful and important. Overindulgence many times produces boredom and inability to enjoy yourself. This holds true for children and adolescents as well. Focusing on one special event or meal can provide the right focus for everyone involved.
- **Budget your money to avoid getting into debt** – Your spending during the holidays needs to be purposeful and you need to determine how much you can spend on gifts, activities, etc. Don’t wait until you are at the mall to decide on this. Making a realistic budget in advance will help you not spend money you don’t have. Money problems is the number one reason for marital problems leading to divorce these days.
- **Try to maintain your routine as much as possible** – Meeting your basic needs on a regular basis will help you keep your stress level manageable. This may mean having to decline some invitations or limiting the time you spend with others. This is particularly important for children.

DO: Let go of the past and create new ways to celebrate the holidays:
• People who have experienced losses need to allow themselves time to feel sad or lonely. Whether you lost a loved one, your job, your home, your marriage, or any other significant loss, you are going to need time to grieve these losses. These feelings are normal. Just because you see commercials everywhere about the holidays being “the magical time of the year” doesn’t mean that you have to feel that way regardless of what you’ve experienced in the recent past. It’s important that you tell yourself that your feelings are temporary and look toward the future with hope.

• Forgive and decide to let go of old grudges. Holding on to these very likely harms you more than the other person. So be good to yourself and release what you’ve been holding on to.

• Help someone in need. This may sound like an oxymoron, but the reality is that quite possibly there is someone worse off than you. Don’t underestimate how valuable your contribution to others can be. Giving and being generous goes beyond the material. You can give of yourself to others, and that is the best gift you can give them.

• Create new traditions. Perhaps you don’t have the means to carry on with old traditions, yet you can create meaning in activities that transcend that. Involve your family members in this and you might just discover how creative this process can be. An additional benefit is that the connection with family members, neighbors and friends can become stronger.

• Contact someone with whom you’ve lost touch. Renewing relationships with others can be re-energizing and give meaning to your life and theirs.

• Focus on enjoying your relationships rather than impressing everyone with your giving, cooking, or home décor. While it’s important to provide a comfortable environment for your guests, it’s even more important for you to have the energy and time to have a presence that nurtures relationships with others.

• Give other the opportunity to help you if you are going through a difficult time. Tell them what you need from them and allow them to love you and care for you.

• Limit the time you spend with difficult or demanding individuals in your life. High maintenance relationships need to be taken in small doses. It’s better to have a short and courteous visit with them than an extended one filled with tension or strife.

• If you have experienced the loss of a loved one this year you may want to plan a celebration in their honor as a ritual of remembrance during a special meal or gathering. Make sure you are emotionally ready for this, as people need sufficient time to grieve first. Examples of this may include showing photographs, lighting a candle, talking about good times with the person, or telling fun stories about them.

DON’T’s of Managing the Holiday Blues:
• **Don’t drink in excess.** Alcohol initially makes you happy, but subsequently acts as a Central Nervous System suppressant producing fatigue and sedation, and it can intensify feelings of sadness, anxiety, or depressive symptoms. Hangovers are also quite unpleasant, and may interfere with your ability to function well the next day. Alcohol can also interact with other medications you may be taking, leading to adverse side effects.

• **Don’t drive under the influence.** People’s reflexes and judgment are diminished when under the influence of alcohol or drugs. You may get into trouble with the law or have to deal with other unanticipated negative consequences.

• **Don’t overeat.** Holiday foods rich in fats and sugar need to be taken in small portions to avoid weight gain and feelings of guilt that usually last well past the holidays.

• **Don’t have unrealistic expectations of yourself and others.** This is very important to remember and practice. Overextending yourself will only result in excessive stress. Conserving your time, energy, and resources for the priorities in your life is key during the holidays. This is true for children as well, as they tend to feel overwhelmed with excessive stimuli. Don’t focus on what you don’t have. It’s preferable to enjoy what you do have and be thankful. Don’t spend money you don’t have. Don’t allow the past or your losses to rob you of the joy of the moment. Don’t get caught in comparisons. And remember, your children are learning from what you model for them.

  Three principles that will help you during the holiday season are found in St. Augustine’s Serenity Prayer:

  Lord, grant me the serenity to **accept** the things I cannot change, **courage** to change the things I can, and **wisdom** to know the difference.

  Finally, be sure and seek help from a professional counselor if the sadness persists or gets worse.

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