

# Beating the Holiday Blues

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Holidays can be happy – but for most they are a mix of good and bad, like everything else in life. In fact, for those who are struggling, the holidays can be a catalyst for increased stress and sadness.

More often than not, we set ourselves up for failure during the holidays by...

1. Fantasizing about unrealistic outcomes. The unmet expectations leave us sadder and more hopeless than before. There's nothing magical about the holidays that will make what happens the rest of the year be better – what was a problem is a problem on steroids during the holidays.

It's like weight loss. It's not so much what you eat during the holidays as what you eat the rest of the year. Proverbs 13:12 says "Hope deferred makes the heart sick... When you build unreal expectations you set yourself up for a sick heart.

Dip your holiday plans in the pool of reality. Ask yourself questions like – "do I have the emotional, financial and practical resources to do X?" Maybe a scaled-down version of X is more realistic.

2. Isolating – The only thing lonelier than being alone is being alone in a crowd. Try not to go shopping or to church by yourself. Watching others participate in healthy loving connection while you are not, is a cruel reminder of what you long for but do not possess.

Make attempts to connect with safe, sane people. The worst thing you can do is isolate yourself from the very people God may want to use to encourage and restore you. Make plans. Don't sit around and wait to be invited. Take some calculated risks – put yourself out there.

3. Eating and drinking too much. Alcohol and high calorie sweets are great comfort foods, but their effect is temporary and when it wears off you feel worse. Then, you crave more.

Beyond the psychological effects, there are physiological effects of sugars (alcohol is very high in sugar content too) that affect depression and anxiety. Too much sugar affects energy levels (they spike and crash) and brain function. Unstable blood sugar has been related to increased anxiety and panic attacks.

4. Overwhelming ourselves with "to-dos". What happens with anxiety and depression is we begin to build a high wall of tasks and spend more time fretting

over the mountain of holiday chores (get the tree, get presents, make food, send Christmas cards, etc.) than we do taking action.

It's more effective to do what is in front of you and minimize the multi-task mentality. With every item you cross off your list you feel a sense of accomplishment and an empowerment that begins to view the long list of duties as manageable. Do one thing at a time!

5. Allowing boundary-busters into our safe zone. Many of us have relatives, friends or co-workers who are not safe jump into our lives during the holidays.

While you may not be able to avoid contact, you can set and hold firm emotional boundaries. But, you must pre-plan to be successful. If you are blind-sided by that hurtful person you will likely react instead of respond and feel bad about it for days, weeks, even years into the future. "Why did I let them hurt me again?"

Plan your response – when uncle Bill brings up what a brat I was as a kid I'm going to say – "Uncle Bill, when you talk about that it hurts my feelings, please stop." Use the formula, "when you do X, it makes me feel Y". Your feelings cannot be disputed, they are what they are.

If he refuses or minimizes your request – plan your response options. As an adult you may choose to distance yourself from the situation or call a safe friend to share your emotions. Make a plan.

6. Not taking care of ourselves – emotionally and physically. It's the giving season – but when we give to ourselves we can see that as selfish. Some of us hear the old tapes playing in our head shouting "It's all about you – isn't it?"

Here's a secret, people who truly love you don't love you because of what you give to them. They love you because of who you are.

You cannot be the best, loving and lovable you if you don't sleep enough, eat well, exercise or take time to be quiet with God, yourself and others. Put on your oxygen mask first. Eat, exercise and be kind to yourself!

7. Spending beyond our means. Proverbs 22:7 says - the borrower becomes the lender's slave. We've seen on a national scale what kind of pain that brings in recent years. If you're not good with finances get help. Make a budget and follow it!

Sometimes we fantasize about the impact that perfect gift will have. "Maybe they'll really know how much I care when they get this." In reality, their reaction rarely meets your expectation and you feel like a sucker for investing sacrificially and being unappreciated. It's a disappointment that leads to discouragement and fosters hopeless feelings.

Hebrews 13:5 says - *Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have, for He Himself has said "I will never desert you, nor will I forsake you."* It's a bit cliché, but the best gifts in life have little to do with money or status.

8. Letting the past destroy the present. Not even God can change the past – but you can begin a new and better life history this very moment.

Many of us have sad holiday memories and lock ourselves into the same painful patterns of the past, often in hopes of finally getting it right. We attempt to re-create the pain of our past and re-shape it into what we wished it would or should have been. Stop it.

You are not bound by rules or traditions that are harmful. You're not the little kid who was powerless, you are now an adult and have full permission and ability to do what is helpful, not hurtful. Sometimes we just don't recognize that we now have adult choices.

Create a new, more positive holiday experience by trying new and different things. If you find the holidays equal fatigue, worry and frustration for you – it's time to make some changes.