



The holiday blues

Feelings of sadness and depression are common during the holidays, but not inevitable By Dr Ken Ung

You may think it's strange when you hear of people feeling down and depressed during the holidays – surely this is a time of rest, relaxation and happiness. Although that may be true for the majority, a small minority actually feel depressed.

One major reason for this is due to stress – or bad stress (distress) to be more precise. Any major change brings a certain amount of stress, and how the stress affects a person depends on how that person perceives stress, how severe it is, how long it lasts and how vulnerable the person is. For example, if a really bad thing happened during the holiday period i.e. the death of a close friend or relative around Christmas time for instance, there can be an 'anniversary reaction' whereby bad memories of a past trauma are re-triggered every year. I have a patient who almost always lapses into severe depression each Chinese New Year because of memories of the loss of a child through suicide many years ago during that period.

Children and holidays

Another example of distress during the holiday period is related to children. Parents with small children (the more children they have, generally the more stress) may relate to this. During school-time, there is at least some respite for a few hours during the day but the holidays can be a nightmare with children running around, feeling bored, and being demanding. The stress is much more if the child is a challenging one – for example, if they are intellectually impaired or suffer from Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Going on holiday under these circumstances can present a formidable challenge to parents. It's a good idea not to bite off more than you can chew and you may want to wait until the children are a bit older before you go on that fateful trip (of course there are always those lucky parents whose children are obedient and quiet). Alternatively, plan carefully, bring enough manpower (whoever you can enlist, i.e. grandparents, relatives, maids, etc)

and keep things structured so that the kids can be distracted. There's nothing like bored, hyperactive whining kids to send your mood plummeting. If money is no object, choose a holiday that is kid-friendly (going on a tour is not a good example), such as resorts with child-care facilities and programmes. Club Med is the epitome of a structured, 'keep the kid occupied until they fall asleep from sheer exhaustion' holiday atmosphere.

It's worthwhile to plan ahead and organise a programme to keep the kids occupied and to try to enlist some extra help during this period. It's more like a marathon than a sprint, so conserve your energy, plan and accept help from whoever offers it. This should leave you with enough energy to actually enjoy the holiday period with your kids.

Loneliness and despair

Some researchers have found the odd phenomenon of small increases

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in the death rate coinciding with major holiday periods i.e. Christmas. There are probably two reasons behind this. One relates to how someone who is close to death can hold off until a certain event where they see a loved one for the last time (for example, a dying mother who waits for her beloved son to come back from abroad during the Christmas holiday period). The other relates to loneliness and hopelessness. We tend to compare ourselves with other people and those who are without friends or family members can feel terribly lonely during the holiday periods as they observe others having fun and being around others who care for them.

The loneliness can bring about such despair that death and suicide becomes an option in this group of vulnerable people. After all, we are social beings and being alone is bad for our health – physically, psychologically and spiritually. Yes, there's the odd exception of those hermits who seem happy enough to be by themselves for long periods of time but that's very much the exception rather than the rule. The holidays can be a time when the contrasts between the haves and the have-nots become starker. Those who are prone to making comparisons and feeling dissatisfied will suffer greatly during this period. I have quite a number of patients who feel terribly down during the holidays as they feel 'cut-off' from the family. Sometimes this is real, and sometimes it is more in the way the person thinks.

Some people can be alone and not feel lonely and then there are those who are not alone and yet feel lonely. As Shakespeare aptly stated: "Tis thinking that makes it so". So guard your minds against patterns of negativity and distorted thoughts. Most people who are prone to feeling down and depressed will be able to identify their negative thought patterns. For those who feel 'cut-off' from others and lonely, there are always things you can do to feel connected.

The elderly

The elderly are a large group who can feel alone during the holiday period, especially if they are also physically

unwell or disabled. If you are in this group you should try to seek out activities that are planned by your local community centre. Places of worship, such as churches can provide a welcoming environment during these holiday periods and can present a refuge. Be prepared to accept help and don't say no to those friends and relatives who may want to visit. Sometimes the elderly can feel a loss of face in accepting help and may be afraid to ask or voice out their desires. Relatives and friends can help by putting it in a way that does not dent the pride of the elderly and the elderly can help themselves by learning to ask for and accept help.

What you can do

Those prone to the holiday blues can take certain steps to make it a better and more enjoyable time. Here are some general tips to make it a more cheerful time:

- Try to plan ahead and pre-empt problems
- Be prepared to ask for and accept help from others
- Have a sense of humour and learn to laugh at yourself when things go awry
- Preserve your energy if you have kids – take it as a marathon rather than a sprint
- If you're prone to feeling lonely, try to keep busy and try to connect with people such as friends, relatives or even strangers (i.e. in church)
- Try to limit comparing yourself with others. We usually compare ourselves with those who are better off than us and feel down when we do so. If need be, compare yourself with those worse off than you
- Consider seeing a counsellor if you struggle with morbid negative thoughts that bring your mood crashing down. ♥

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