

How to manage the holiday blues | Opinion

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN SENTINEL | DEC 09, 2021 AT 3:41 PM



Jessica Ruiz (Carlos Hidalgo / Courtesy)

It's not out of the ordinary to feel anxious, depressed or lonely around the holidays. In fact, there are even famous songs about the yuletide blues, from Kacey Musgraves' "Christmas Makes me Cry" to Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas."

This wintertime melancholy is not just fodder for catchy lyrics. According to a survey by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, [64% of those with mental health disorders](#) report the holidays make their conditions worse. We also see this every year at Behavioral Health Associates of Broward, Counseling Centers of Goodman Jewish Family Services when countless patients come in because the holidays are taking a toll on their mental health. The situational pressures surrounding this time of year can lead to short-term behavioral health issues.

Between tense family dynamics, grieving loved ones and feelings of loneliness, this can be a tough time of year for many people. That's why equipping yourself with the right tools can alleviate triggers that lead to a less-than-merry season.

Navigating tense family dynamics

Last year, many people did not get to spend the holidays with their families and friends due to COVID-19. While reuniting can be exciting, it can also cause quite a bit of stress. Different personalities, views, beliefs and ways of communicating can easily spur conflict.

Some tips and strategies that can help you navigate challenging family dynamics include:

- Sit close to those who you enjoy speaking with at the dinner table.
- Bring a supportive person with you to the gathering.
- Avoid discussing topics that are known to lead to arguments.
- Keep in mind the reasons for coming together.
- Be kind.
- Be mindful of your own needs and practice self-care.
- Have an exit strategy.

Grieving a loved one

While holidays are a time of reflection and connection with family and friends, they can also be a painful reminder of those who are no longer with us. Whether you're mourning someone who passed recently or many years ago, it's important to understand that grieving is not a linear process.

Everyone grieves differently, and missing those who have departed is a natural part of the human condition. Holiday celebrations can trigger memories of the past, and nothing hurts more than that empty seat at the table. Allow yourself and your loved ones the space to mourn and honor the deceased in their own way during this time. And don't be afraid to ask for and accept support from those who can provide comfort and understanding.

Far away and feeling lonely

Not everyone has family or friends to spend the holidays with. Some fly solo because they are in a new town and far from home; others lost their immediate family or are estranged from

them. Whatever the reason may be, it doesn't change the fact that end-of-year festivities can trigger a deep sense of loneliness.

Rather than pushing these feelings down, acknowledge them and let them pass through you. Cry if you need to, even if everyone is telling you to be merry and bright. Moreover, manage your expectations. Anxieties about not having close family or a romantic partner may feel magnified during the holidays, so try to shift your focus to the things that you do have.

If you or a loved one are struggling with mental health issues this holiday season, know that you are not alone. If these feelings persist, especially after the holidays, talk to a mental health professional or your primary care doctor. Addressing disorders like depression and anxiety early on make them much easier to treat.

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