

Beating the Holiday Blues

By Lindsay Woolman, Featured in *South Coast Health Magazine*, 2008

A lot of people begin the holiday season by making a list. This list may include gifts to give, parties to attend, and relatives to visit. Generally, this list does not include mental and physical health as a top priority. Instead, many put themselves at the end of their list and consequently, some may experience what is commonly known as the “holiday blues.”

The blues are usually a passing phase that includes sadness, depression, anxiety and grief for a short period of time. Anyone is susceptible, and the blues can strike at any time of the year, but most folks have trouble during the holiday season. The blues are especially common for those who have recently lost a loved one or had a major life change with which they are struggling. Some individuals also have trouble when the days get shorter and exposure to light is limited.

Richard Granese, M.D., the current Medical Director and Chairman of the Behavioral Health Department at South Coast Medical Center, often works with these cases of depression in conjunction with a psychologist or licensed mental health worker. The other psychiatrists in the department include Kishore Desagani, M.D., Nicole Carlberg, D.O., Eric Speare, M.D., and Martin Karasch, M.D. The SCMC psychiatric team agrees that the holidays are a particularly stressful time. Their combined expertise suggests that some of the major stressors are family events, unrealistic expectations, finances, a recent loss, and drug and alcohol problems. Becoming aware of these situations and learning how to handle them can make for a better holiday season.

Holiday Stressors Decoded

“Family tension is one of the biggest holiday stressors,” explains Dr. Granese. “When families are reunited there is potential for conflict, especially if there are underlying issues.” If these familial gatherings are awkward and/or forced, this may increase the anxiety. Some may also feel stressed about the added expenses during this time of year. The level of financial concern will increase with the anticipation of the bills that will pile up at the end of the season.

Another factor that may lead to the blues is unrealistic expectations. There may be pressure to attend the best parties, buy the most expensive gifts, and put on a happy face. The perception that everyone is supposed to be celebratory can really take a toll. “The pressure to be joyful during these times is very high,” says Dr.

Karasch. "And when a person's expectations aren't met, this may ultimately lead to disappointment and depression." Some men and women may also notice more loneliness and past memories surfacing, as the holidays are often an annual reminder of what is missing.

When these stressors are combined, the blues may shift into clinical depression or manifest into other problems, such as eating disorders or drug and alcohol addiction. Says Dr. Desagani, "People who are depressed and anxious often start self-medicating themselves with alcohol and other drugs—and it actually makes the depression worse." The chemicals in these substances may intensify the depression in the long run and cause a person to be in denial that there is a problem.

When to Seek Care

So, how can someone discern whether or not treatment is needed? "Each person really needs to look at his or her overall ability to thrive and function," says Dr. Carlberg. A person with the blues may notice he or she is less motivated and is having symptoms of low self-esteem. Behaviors such as avoiding eye contact with others or having a negative self-perception could also be signs that help is needed. "A depressed mood turns into clinical depression when it starts to significantly impact your life," adds Dr. Carlberg. Those who have a genetic predisposition or a previous history of depression will be more susceptible.

Some of the hallmark symptoms of depression include changes in sleeping patterns or appetite, non-enjoyment of pleasurable activities, increased irritability, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, energy and concentration changes, worsening physical health, and thoughts of suicide. If these criteria are met every day for just two weeks, the person has clinical depression. This illness is as serious as if having a chronic, life-threatening physical condition and shouldn't be taken lightly. A person with suicidal thoughts needs to seek immediate medical care. Often times it is not the actual person who notices this change in his or her demeanor, but a loved one who sees the shift. Close friends and relatives should seek action immediately for their loved one who is having a difficult time with the holiday blues.

Help Is Here

"Medication combined with therapy is the most effective treatment for depression," explains Dr. Granese. In milder cases, antidepressants may be prescribed for just a few months, while in more chronic cases medication may need to be taken over a lifetime. "Depression is a recurrent illness, so someone who has one episode has a 50% chance of having another episode," he says. For those who have recurring

episodes, staying on medication is recommended as long as there are no side effects.

Another therapeutic intervention for the holiday blues is talk therapy, also known as psychotherapy. One particularly helpful type of psychotherapy is known as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). This therapy is designed to change the negative thinking patterns associated with the blues and depression. Trained counselors such as psychologists, clinical social workers, and marriage and family therapists typically do this type of therapeutic work.

Psychiatrists are also quite important in the behavioral health field. In addition to working with patients, a psychiatrist also has a medical degree and is able to prescribe and manage medication. A general practitioner can also prescribe medication for depression, but the physician should first take a complete psychiatric history.

Most adults will eventually see their outlook improving with psychotherapy or medication. However, if the depression worsens or becomes life-threatening, Dr. Granese will consider performing a procedure called electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). With ECT, electrical impulses are delivered to stimulate the brain while the person is under anesthesia. ECT is an option if there is no response to any other form of treatment or medication. This type of therapy is very rare, with only 100,000 performed in the U.S. each year. The therapy has a 90% success rate and improvements may be noticed after as few as three treatments.

Tips to Avoid the Blues

The right tools can keep a person from singing the blues. Dr. Speare recommends eating a healthy diet and avoiding excessive alcohol intake, as one way to relieve stress. Another stress reliever is managing daily activities. When a person plans out their daily schedule ahead of time, it helps them to get a handle on their bustling activities a little more easily. "Each person should make sure to stick to a good schedule and keep structure in his/her life," suggests Dr. Desagani. If finances are causing the stress, the person should set a budget and shop early, to avoid the holiday rush. It's important to also keep in mind that a thoughtful gift is worth more than an expensive one. Dr. Speare recommends eating a healthy diet rich in proteins and limiting simple carbohydrates. Avoiding excessive alcohol intake and continuing to schedule regular exercise is also important. "Aerobic exercise and resistance training help increase perspective, feelings of well-being, and contributes to a greater sense of control over one's life," he says.

It's also a good idea to continue to care for everyday needs, like taking the dog for a walk or getting to the grocery store. "What you don't want to do is hide," says Dr. Carlberg. "Isolation is never beneficial for those who are going through a depression." Make a point to get out of the house and check in with a loved one or a therapist on a regular basis.

For any South Orange County residents who anticipate encountering the holiday blues this season, contact SCMC's Behavioral Health department before the symptoms arise. Since antidepressants usually take 2-3 weeks before they become effective, starting medication early could make a big difference.

Surprisingly, the busiest time in the Behavioral Health department is *after* the holidays. "Because our patients will be so driven in getting their shopping done, getting through all the parties, and family gatherings, they won't crash until after the holidays," says Dr. Granese. "In fact, our busiest months are January through March."

As a precaution, watch for the signs of depression and have an action plan ready. Depression is a very common and treatable condition and it does not have to be a part of any season. So this year when making a holiday to-do list, take a moment and put "beating the blues" at the top.

[Sidebar]

Your Holiday List for Beating the Blues

- Avoid drugs and other substances that may worsen depression.
- Be financially responsible.
- Check in with someone regularly.
- Create new memories, rather than dwelling on old ones.
- Delegate tasks to others if hosting a large party.
- Don't expect family gatherings or parties to be perfect.
- Don't hide or isolate yourself.
- Exercise and eat a healthy diet.
- Give yourself permission to grieve if necessary.
- Have realistic expectations.
- Keep in mind that the media does not give an accurate portrayal of the holidays—no family is happy all the time.
- Keep structure during the day.
- Limit alcohol and caffeine intake.
- Make time for yourself.
- Seek out help early.

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- Seek out people who are enjoyable.
- Volunteer to help others.