

How You Can Survive the Holiday Blues

I'm a sentimental guy, so I start listening to Christmas music at the end of October. But I know many people who don't enjoy hearing songs about chestnuts roasting on an open fire or "hearts all aglow." And they certainly don't want to hear about "the hap-happiest season of all."

Christmas can be a drag when you're depressed.

It's actually strange that we've made Christmas into this perfect Currier and Ives experience, all decorated with snowflakes and flying reindeer. We sing about Christmas as if normal life stops for two weeks so we can toast marshmallows, listen to silver bells and ride in sleighs after we open our yuletide treasure.

But that's a total fantasy. It's impossible to "strike the harp and join the chorus" when you have the holiday blues.

Christmas can trigger depression. Sometimes cold weather and longer nights can make us sad. Sometimes we get depressed because we spend too much money on gifts or because we didn't have enough money to buy what our friends got. Christmas can also be stressful because holidays are lonely when you've lost a family member.

If you are struggling with holiday depression, here are a few suggestions to help you survive the Christmas season:

1. It's OK to grieve. Christmas can trigger memories of divorce, the death of a loved one or the loss of other important relationships. You don't have to pretend your pain isn't there. You may even want to put a photo of your lost loved one in a special frame for others to see. It's okay to cry, but invite the Holy Spirit, your Comforter (see John

14:16), to hold you close as you grieve.

2. Don't hide under the covers. Many people with seasonal depression don't want to be around people. That's understandable—but being alone is not the best solution. You don't have to hang around in crowded stores or go to every party, but spend time with supportive friends even if you are tempted to avoid them. I know people who skip church functions during the holidays because they don't like to see happy families together. Go to church anyway. God may put someone in your path to encourage you.

3. Avoid consumerism. Many people get depressed at Christmas because they feel pressure to buy expensive presents. You can resist. You don't have to compete with anyone else's Christmas giving. Throw away the catalogs, tune out the advertisements and avoid the malls. Keep your gift giving simple and live within your means. You don't want more reasons to be depressed when the bills come in January.

4. Don't get on a sugar high. Sometimes holiday depression is caused by your diet. The eggnog, gingerbread and Snickerdoodles alone are enough to send anyone into a diabetic coma—but then some people pour on the alcohol too. Too much sugar will take you high and then drop you into an emotional pit. It's best to abstain from the sweets and start your New Year's healthy eating plan early.

5. Take time to relax—and laugh. Some of us get depressed because we are so frazzled. We overschedule, overeat and overstress during our "time off." Don't work so hard that you need a vacation when it's time to go back to your job. Learn to relax. Take a nap. Take a walk. Smell the coffee and the pine boughs. Hold a baby or play with a child. And remember to laugh—it is "good medicine," according to Proverbs 17:22. Laughter releases chemicals in our bodies that overcome stress and boost the immune system.

6. Give to others. Depression causes us to focus on ourselves, so the best remedy is to focus on someone else. You can prepare a meal for a needy family or visit a homeless shelter. Or just send personalized Christmas messages to people on social media. Remember, you are not the only one who might be hurting emotionally this Christmas. Your words of kindness might free someone else from the holiday blues.

Finally, it's good to focus your thoughts on the original Christmas story—which had nothing to do with glistening treetops or boughs of holly. The first Christmas was not a happy time. It was marked by intense family drama, terroristic threats, strange visitors, a sudden evacuation, the slaughter of innocent children and the stress of an unplanned pregnancy. And I'm sure Mary and Joseph weren't drinking eggnog.

Yet despite their depressing circumstances, God brought His Son into this dark world. The angel who announced His birth said: "Listen! Do not fear. For I bring you good news of great joy, which will be to all people" (Luke 2:10b). This "great joy" was not found in gifts, decorations, shopping or parties. It was found in Christ, who came into this world to take away our sins.

Regardless of how you feel this Christmas, you can look up in wonder and behold the source of true joy. He brought us an unspeakable joy that transcends our emotions and outlives this sad world. And His abiding joy will be waiting for us when this life is over. {eoa}