

Stewarding Your Mental Wellness Over the Holiday Season

The months of November through January are known as those when people experience the highest levels of depression. This type of depression has gained the term “holiday blues.” That is because it often occurs during the holiday season. Here are four powerful strategies, drawing on both clinical insights and biblical wisdom, to help you stay ahead of and overcome the holiday blues.

1. Maintain a routine. I use the term “routine” somewhat loosely because I understand that holidays bring their own slew of hectic schedules: from children being off school if you’re a parent, to having to go out of town to visit family or host family, which brings on its own type of stress. So often we remain on the defensive side of the holiday season, meaning we just take issues as they come rather than remaining on the offensive, as in, looking ahead on our calendar and saying to ourselves, “OK, regardless of what’s going on over the next month or two, I’m going to make sure that I go to bed within one hour of my usual bedtime.”

While it is understandable that you can’t always go to bed at 10 p.m. if that’s your usual bedtime if you have family over or if you’re up baking or wrapping presents, let me preface with this. It’s not getting out of routine for one day that may cause a ripple effect of subconscious stress, but rather when you do it on the first day followed by the next day and so forth.

Promise yourself that regardless of what’s going on throughout the holidays, if you and your spouse, for example, have date nights on Thursdays, stick to those date nights as best as you

can. If you miss a Thursday, that's fine, but get back on track the next week. Remember, we are creatures of habit. When you switch up your routine little by little, if during the winter blues months and the stress of the busy season you give up date nights, then you miss out on your sleep routine, you likely begin to create a domino effect that eventually increases a stress hormone called cortisol, leading to anxiety and depression.

The best way to defeat the odds of winter blues is to write down three things that will make sure you continue to maintain your routine during the holidays and stick to them. For me, those three things are: First, my time with the Lord. So, if I set my schedule to wake up earlier to spend time with the Lord, then that's going to force me to maintain a consistent sleep schedule, so, No. 2, I must go to bed within one hour of my usual bedtime no matter how badly I want to finish that movie I started. And No. 3 for me is making sure I hang out with one loved one, whether that's a friend or a family member, during the holiday season just to catch up regardless of how busy I am because of something I normally do throughout the week. What are your three?

2. Set healthy boundaries. I know so many people who say yes impulsively, sign up for extra activities or extra service opportunities out of guilt when their plate is already overflowing. Before Christmas gets here, and before you begin putting things on your calendar for the upcoming year and signing yourself up, committing yourself for the next year, I'd like to encourage you to take a step back and commit to praying for three days about whatever decision you need to make. The reality is, the decision is still going to be there for you to make, but what you won't have to do is sign up, commit yourself, feel overwhelmed for committing yourself or overcommitting yourself, and then feel guilty for having to back out and/or feeling overwhelmed for not backing out.



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So, to skip that whole cycle to begin with and overcome your chances of falling into the holiday blues because of overcommitment, take three days and ask the Lord, regardless of how "Christian" the activity or the act may seem, "Lord, is this something you want me to partake in? If so, please give me peace about it. If not, please help me to let go of it." Psalm 32:8 (NIV) says, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you."

Friend, if hosting extended family members at your house is going to create extra conflict between you and your spouse, then maybe hosting them is not a good idea. If signing up for extra church activities throughout the year will cause you undue stress, then my question to you is "Are you trying to carry a load that Jesus didn't ask you to carry?" Matthew 11:30 says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." That's not to say that the Christian life is easy, but God will never ask you to misplace the priorities He has already given you. As His child, your priorities are: your time with Him, first; your ministry at home, second; and then the rest as He instructs you.

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3. Watch how you speak to yourself. We talk to ourselves more than we talk to anyone. In times of stress when we're trying to get things done or things aren't going our way, it can be too easy to go down a spiral and turn our negativity inward. Just as you would guard your heart against anyone who would be emotionally toxic to you, it's important to pay close attention and watch how you speak to yourself and ask yourself: Is the devil using me as my own mouthpiece to put myself down?

What I found so often is especially around the holidays, or after the holidays, when we have gathered around family members who may have exchanged hurtful words with us before or during the holiday time, if we don't take the time to process through that hurt, we may stew on the words they said to us long enough that they become part of our own inner monologue, and that's not healthy.

You see, you may not be able to control what other people say to you or the backhanded compliments you may receive from Aunt Melba or the comments such as "You're not married yet?" from well-intended or maybe not so well-intended loved ones, causing you to cringe every time you see them. You may not be able to help the way your in-law tries to overstep your parenting or the way your family constantly compares you to your sibling, or maybe even how your husband is treated in comparison to your sister's.

So rather than entering the environment feeling vulnerable, anxious and coming out filled with inner turmoil, I encourage you to pray. Ask the Lord to guard your heart by the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to give you His peace that surpasses understanding and to protect you throughout the holiday season and beyond. Pray that God will give you discernment in the spirit so that you can tell when the enemy is whispering lies in your ears so as to not receive them. Invest time in God's Word, which goes back to point No. 1: Make sure that as you protect whatever level of routine you have, that it includes spending time reading about who God says you are.

Over the next few weeks, I encourage you to look up and meditate on these three verses, which talk about who you are God's love for you:

a) Psalm 103:12 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." This means it doesn't matter how many sins came into your relationship with God with, no matter how many mistakes loved ones keep

reminding you of, God, who has the ultimate authority over heaven and earth, shows that in Jesus, He has forgiven you; and therefore, you are forgiven.

b) Romans 8:38-39 says, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing you're going through right now would indicate that God has stopped loving you. Nothing and no one has the power to separate you from God's love that He shows you in Christ. No struggle you are enduring right now has the power to separate you from God's love for you. In times of struggle, you may feel that God is absent from you, but remember, no power in hell is that powerful. Even if you don't feel Him with you in the midst of your struggle, remind yourself "God has not left me" because His Word says "He will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut. 3:16b).

c) John 15:5 says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." As the new year begins and in the coming months, just remember that there is nothing this world can offer you that can substitute for the peace and joy you can have in Jesus. Trying to maintain joy and peace without staying connected to Jesus is like watering a branch that's fallen on the sidewalk, hoping it will come back to life. It won't work. Instead, stay rooted in God's Word and get to know Him and what He says about you. If this means reading a version of the Bible that's easier for you to understand, then so be it. Appropriating the truth of God's Word over your life is how you win the war against a toxic inner monologue.

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4. Reframe isolation. One of the greatest contributors to holiday blues is when we experience periods of isolation. This is especially true if the year has brought on loss of loved ones or we feel estranged from family members. I come across many patients who are estranged from their adult children, and during this time, they feel like they're grieving the loss of their family over and over to the point where they dread the holidays and don't look forward to the coming year.

In order to stay ahead of this feeling, let's identify what's causing it. Is it a lie you're believing from the enemy of your soul? Study these four lies people often believe when facing isolation and how to address each one in order to reframe them properly.

– **“God is punishing me.”** Although as believers, we may bear natural consequences of our actions, in Christ, Jesus took our punishment on the cross (Isa. 53:5), and therefore God doesn't sit there and say: “because you did this I'm going to punish you this way.” That's not how God works. God's Word says His mercies are new for you each and every morning (Lam. 3:22-23). Which means if you messed up today, you can run to your Father (Heb. 4:16), ask Him to forgive you and to help you to walk in His ways and know with full confidence that He has forgiven you (1 John 1: 9).

– **“God is mad at me.”** This is often the result of us projecting how others have treated us onto God. People will fail you day in and day out, but God is faithful to you. In fact, God is so committed to you that in Christ, He put his Holy Spirit within you to keep you from self-destructing. John 14:26-28 refers to the Holy Spirit as “the Counselor” and “the Comforter.” If you need comforting, seek His presence. His Word says if you seek Him with all your heart, “you will find me” (Jer. 29:13b).

– **“God has left me.”** Many of us fall into this pattern of thinking in times of struggle because we feel that the reason

we're struggling is because God, who is all-sovereign, has left us. My friend, remember that your relationship with Jesus is not contingent on the absence of struggle, but rather the faithfulness of your heavenly Father, who promises to never leave you nor forsake you. Whenever you're tempted to believe God has left you, remember that if He is allowing a struggle in your life, even when it doesn't feel good, He will bring something good out of it. Your enemy, the devil, doesn't have the final say. God does! This is not our home; heaven is our home. And as awful as what you're going through may be, trust that one day, because of Jesus, you're going to be rejoicing in everlasting glory where there are no tears, no scars and no pain. This is all because you have a Savior who decided to come down in human form to die on your behalf so that you could have a relationship with Him forever. If that's not love, I don't know what is!

– **"I'm worthless."** don't let the enemy put a damper on your witness by convincing you that your life has no meaning. During holiday blues, especially in times when you want to just withdraw, remind yourself that there are times when God will set people apart for Himself to use them for His glory. So rather than closing yourself off, ask the Lord to give you an opportunity to use bits and pieces of your testimony to share with someone who needs to hear it. Matthew 9:35-38 talks about how there are plenty of people hungry to hear what God has done in someone's life. I implore you to use this time God has given you free of distraction to wake up ready for Him to present you with opportunity. There are plenty of people who need to hear those bits and pieces of what God has done in your life. You don't need to give a grand speech; all you need to do is be willing to be a vessel for His kingdom, and when God works through you, you feel joy that nothing in this world and no one in this world can give you. All you have to do is be a willing vessel and watch how God uses you to inspire others in a way you never thought possible.

Celebrate the Joyful Season

As the holidays approach, get ahead of the holiday blues by maintaining a few key items in your routine that you'll continue to do, set healthy boundaries around your life to make sure you're taking care of yourself and watch your internal monologue. Finally, remember to pray for opportunities to use your story for His glory!

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