

Don't Let Holiday Depression Drag You Down

Christmas has always been my favorite time of year. But I've noticed it hasn't been the same for the past two years since I lost my dad. He died in January 2018—and two Christmases ago he was sick with the flu and gasping for breath. My memories of that holiday were bittersweet—especially because his nursing home was under quarantine and I couldn't visit him on Christmas day.

I've since learned that many people deal with various levels of depression during the Christmas holidays because they have lost loved ones. Memories of loss can trigger sad thoughts. Depression can also hit hard because of cold weather, longer winter nights, loneliness or holiday stress.

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

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 OK to cry, but invite the Holy Spirit to be your Comforter (see John 14:16). Let Him 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 crowded stores. 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 limit 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. Talk 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 Prov. 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 a nursing home. 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 spiked eggnog while they were fleeing from King Herod.

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.