

# Eating Away the Holiday Blues



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whether related to family &  
friends,  
anniversary dates,  
SAD, etc.*

The holiday season is meant to be a time full of joy, festivities and togetherness. However, for many, Santa is left holding a mixed bag of emotions. Instead of enjoying togetherness and celebrating with gratitude, holidays often mark a time of loneliness, regret, and anxiety about what the future holds, as well as regrets from the past. More seriously, for those who struggle with emotional eating, this time of year can spell disaster.

## The “Holiday Blues” as a Stress Reaction

The earliest recognition of the “holiday syndrome” was presented by a psychiatrist (Cattell, 1955), when he described the symptoms as “diffuse anxiety, numerous regressive phenomena including marked feelings of helplessness, possessiveness, and increased irritability, nostalgic or bitter ruminations about holiday experiences of youth, depressive affect and a wish for magical resolution of problems”. This description bears strong similarity to major depression. Another author in the 1970’s (Sattin) noted that few people live through the holidays without at least some sadness, disappointment, anxiety, and emotional pain.

Regardless of a ‘clinically’ significant diagnosis, many people suffer from at least some emotional discomfort during the holidays—or maybe less specifically—the winter months. Common factors related to the holiday blues include:

- general increase in stress due to the hustle and bustle of the season
- unrealistic expectations of joy, festivities, family, friends, and self
- predisposition to depression or anxiety
- financial constraints
- inability to be with one’s family and friends
- loss of loved ones over the recent past

Other factors also contribute to a “holiday blues” reaction. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) occurs in individuals who are sensitive to the amount of light a particular season provides. In this area of the country, we receive less than 1/3 of the light rays in the winter than we do during the summer months, with less and less light rays reaching those living closer to the North Pole. Logically, those living further away from the equator have

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not the ones you already have.***

a higher chance of SAD. Although researchers have not firmly committed to one theory concerning the cause of SAD, it is thought that the light that enters the eyes, rather than exposure to the skin, makes the difference in a reaction.

Anniversary dates of traumatic events in life also play a role in a person's emotions during the holidays. For those who have lost loved ones during the holidays, there is often a "cloud" that evolves during those month, overshadowing festivities and joy, and replacing these with sadness, grief, and overall despair. Even if a loved one passed away several years ago, our psychological system reacts and remembers on an emotional calendar. Sometimes we can't even pinpoint why we feel sad until we uncover past events that occurred during that time of the year.

We all hear that 'too much of a good thing' can be bad for us. This holds true for family as well. Although the holidays are expected to be spent with friends and family, less might be "more" in the case of time spent with others. Because families often have unhealthy dynamics, holidays can bring stress and shift adults back into child roles, making it uncomfortable for everyone involved. Ironically, it is not uncommon for domestic violence and abuse rates to increase during holidays due to an increase in stress and tension between families.

In addition, religious expectations may increase a person's likelihood to develop holiday blues. Many people don't go to church unless it's during the holidays. This can cause guilt for not attending services during the year, or cause internal conflict if one questions their beliefs related to their current religion, but feels pressure to attend.

Anxiety related to travel during the holidays can also be an issue. Because many families feel the pressure to visit "home", this can add stress to their own lives. It is not uncommon to feel the pressure to visit multiple family members during a given holiday—often resulting in overall exhaustion and irritability.

Other factors which may contribute to holiday blues include families with a member who has a terminal illness, military families missing a loved one, financial strain due to a weakening economy, loss of jobs due to business closings, corporate downsizing, and even national events such as the losses which occurred as a result of September 11.

Regardless of the cause, it is likely that the holiday blues occur due to a combination of these factors. The following are tips to help prepare for—or prevent the 'blues' easily:

- Keep realistic expectations about family, friends, festivities, finances, etc...
- Place your focus on the meaning of the holidays, not the event.
- Slow down. Pace yourself for the holidays by planning ahead, minimizing costs and actions.

- Be aware of your own triggers, whether related to family/friends, anniversary dates, SAD, etc.
- Focus on the future, not so much on the past. Live in terms of what regrets you can prevent, not the ones you already have.
- Surround yourself with positive people and minimize contact with those who are negative.
- Shake it up a bit! Change your traditions to better suite you and your own loved ones. You don't have to live by "the book"—create your own memories!
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol—this only adds to a depressive response.
- Focus attention on others—volunteer, give to others, etc.
- Gratitude goes a long way. Be thankful for what you have, not focus on what you don't.

### Emotional Eating and the Holidays

Food is prevalent in our country. It is more prevalent during the holidays. Not only is it more prevalent, it is bigger and prettier. When you mix bigger, prettier, and more prevalent food with emotional stress, the combination is explosive. What is even more dangerous is the expectation to consume large amounts of this bigger, prettier, and more prevalent food during the holidays, particularly when you are already susceptible to stress-based eating. Emotional eating is considered as eating which occurs for reasons other than hunger. Pretty simple definition, not so simple solution. (See *the May, 2006 issue for an article on Emotional Eating - you can download it at [www.NaturalTriad.com](http://www.NaturalTriad.com).*)

People in our country gain an average of 10-15 pounds during the holiday season, and the season seems to be getting longer and longer each year. Although many believe that the season does not start until Thanksgiving, Halloween usually marks the first holiday when emotional eating begins. The candy, caramel apples, and other ghostly treats that are available during Halloween are a set-up for those who struggle with emotional eating. The "See-food" effect is usually activated when these items are around, causing emotional eaters to fixate on the item until they have consumed their fill. Most emotional eaters have a need for completion, meaning that until the food is gone, they are tormented by it's presence. Few emotional eaters are able to simply dispose of the food via the trash pail.

Thanksgiving is generally thought of as the holiday when folks overstuff their bellies, then lay down to take a nap or watch football. Rarely does one spend as much time focusing on gratitude as they do preparing and consuming the food connected with the day. For the emotional or binge eater, Thanksgiving is a minefield. These individuals often sneak back into the kitchen

for further helpings, or spend the day tormented by the food that rests quietly in the next room.

Christmas is often the most emotionally "loaded" holiday, with unrealistically high expectations of the day. From Santa's cookies to the family traditional pies, cakes and other desserts, the day is usually a loss for those attempting to watch what they eat. By Christmas day, most people are so fatigued by the holidays that they just throw up their hands and make a pact that after the first of the year, they will get back on track.

Another phenomena that occurs is the "squirrel effect": hoarding food until the new 'crop' arrives. Many feel as if they need to consume as much of the holiday food as possible since they won't have it again for another year. Rather than enjoying the food they have at the moment, an anxiousness arises in not getting "enough" of the food right at the moment to tide them over until the next year. Once again, this anxiousness doesn't subside until the food is gone.

As mentioned earlier, food is prettier during the holidays. There are more colors to our food with festively colored candies, cookies and cakes. Some say that the holiday M&M's even taste better than the original ones. Magazine covers display food more beautifully. Most people buy these magazines because of the covers, not what's in them. But psychologically, once a person sees the beautiful food, it is already implanted in their brain that they have to consume something similarly "beautiful" in taste. (It's ironic that many of these magazines with beautifully displayed food also have headlines sprinkled in concerning the

"New Year Diets", almost giving permission for the indulgence until the first of the year.)

It's important to note that biologically-speaking, people actually do crave more carbohydrates during the winter months. For those who are depressed, the levels of a neurotransmitter called serotonin have fallen in the brain. Once consumed, carbs begin the transformation process to tryptophen (the warm, fuzzy, "nappy" chemical) then go on to turn into serotonin, which is a natural mood balancer/enhancer. Therefore, when we crave carbs, particularly sweets, pastries, etc., we are literally self-medicating to bring our moods back to center. The unfortunate part of the process is that these effects

don't last long, causing somewhat of a crash in our serotonin levels later. Thus beginning the next craving...then consumption of more food. And the cycle goes on....

This holds true for Seasonal Affective Disorder as well. It is proven that those who suffer from SAD also report a marked increase in carbohydrate craving. Our body is asking for what it needs, but we tend to provide it through unhealthy means. (Oddly enough, exercise also increases serotonin, so going for a walk with also eliminate the craving.)

Regardless of the trigger, holidays can create even more stress for the emotional eater. Following are tips for those who suffer from emotional eating during the holidays:

- Know your triggers! Self-awareness really is the key.

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- Once you know your triggers, avoid them! Plan ahead and don't let yourself get hooked into the minefields. Don't put yourself in situations where food will be too prevalent.
- Eat a small healthy snack before you attend a holiday function. You won't be as hungry and will be less likely to eat too much at the event.
- When at the function, load up on available fruits and vegetables before double dipping in the higher carb/calorie foods. This is not to say you can't have some of them, but make sure you are at a healthy level of fullness before you eat a serving size of a food you might regret.
- Avoid consuming alcohol at holiday events. The first thing that goes out the window with alcohol is judgment. Therefore, you won't be able to make as good of food/serving size choices if you consume alcohol.
- Be realistic. Allow yourself to have realistic expectations of the day, both with the people there as well as the food at the event.
- Taste your food! Most people don't practice mindful eating during the rest of the year, let alone during holidays. Slow down long enough to really focus on the taste, texture, and satisfaction you have when eating. Once you start to notice these things, you often don't need as much to enjoy the situation.
- Take responsibility. Just because the food is available, it doesn't mean you have to eat it. Also, don't engage in guilty eating: Eating because you are afraid someone will be offended if you don't eat what they have prepared. That is about them—not you.
- Give yourself a little "room" to be flexible. In other words, don't get so rigid about what you eat that you don't enjoy the event itself. Know that you will have another chance to choose more healthily the next meal
- Prepare your friends/family. Before the event or meal, prepare those around you that you plan to be more mindful of saying 'no' to certain foods, or tell them directly not to pressure you into eating.
- Most importantly, regain the focus on the meaning/purpose of the holidays rather than focus on the anxiety that is attached to them.

Holidays usually invoke a love/hate reaction, and most people are relieved when they are over. However, if you plan ahead to make the upcoming months more manageable through awareness and some proactive plans, you will find that they can be more fulfilling than any others you've had in the past.

Have a safe, joyful, and HEALTHY holiday season!

*This article was submitted by Katherine T. Kelly, Ph.D., M.S.P.H., Director of Branches Holistic Health and Wellness Center (1001 Reynolda Road, Stockton Cottage, Winston-Salem, NC 27104; 336-723-1011. In addition to general wellness and behavioral health issues, she specializes in working with those who have emotional eating issues as well as holistically-based weight management. Visit [www.brancheshelath.com](http://www.brancheshelath.com) See ad on page 29.*



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