

“Winter blues” might be seasonal affective disorder

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that's related to changes in seasons — SAD begins and ends at about the same times every year. If you're like most people with SAD, your symptoms start in the fall and continue into the winter months, sapping your energy and making you feel moody. Less often, SAD causes depression in the spring or early summer.

Treatment for SAD may include light therapy (phototherapy), psychotherapy and medications.

Don't brush off that yearly feeling as simply a case of the "winter blues" or a seasonal funk that you have to tough out on your own. Take steps to keep your mood and motivation steady throughout the year.

In most cases, seasonal affective disorder symptoms appear during late fall or early winter and go away during the sunnier days of spring and summer. However, some people with the opposite pattern have symptoms that begin in spring or summer. In either case, symptoms may start out mild and become more severe as the season progresses.

Major depression

Seasonal affective disorder is a subtype of major depression that comes and goes based on seasons. So symptoms of major depression may be part of SAD, such as:

- Feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day
- Feeling hopeless or worthless
- Having low energy
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Having problems with sleeping
- Experiencing changes in your appetite or weight
- Feeling sluggish or agitated
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Having frequent thoughts of death or suicide

Fall and winter SAD

Symptoms specific to winter-onset SAD, sometimes called winter depression, may include:

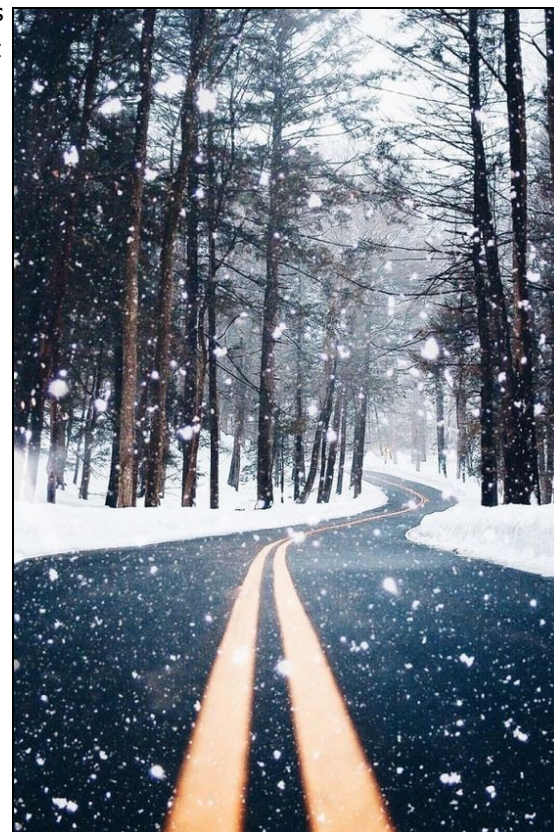
- Irritability
- Tiredness or low energy
- Problems getting along with other people
- Hypersensitivity to rejection
- Heavy, "leaden" feeling in the arms or legs
- Oversleeping
- Appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates
- Agitation or anxiety

Seasonal changes in bipolar disorder

In some people with bipolar disorder, spring and summer can bring on symptoms of mania or a less intense form of mania (hypomania), and fall and winter can be a time of depression.

When to see a doctor

It's normal to have some days when you feel down. But if you feel down for days at a time and you can't get motivated to do activities you normally enjoy, see your doctor. This is especially important if your sleep patterns and appetite have changed or if you feel hopeless, think about suicide, or turn to alcohol for comfort or relaxation.



Information source: Mayo Clinic, mayoclinic.org and Central Counties Services Mental Health staff.



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Newsletter



Stress, depression and the holidays: Tips for coping

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

The holiday season often brings unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. The holidays present a dizzying array of demands — parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few.

But with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress that accompanies the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

Tips to prevent holiday stress and depression

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if the holidays have taken an emotional toll on you in the past.

1. Acknowledge your feelings. If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

2. Reach out. If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.

Holiday stress and coping, continued on page 2.

Holiday stress and coping, continued.

3. Be realistic. The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.

4. Set aside differences. Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.

5. Stick to a budget. Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts.

Try these alternatives:

- Donate to a charity in someone's name.
- Give homemade gifts.
- Start a family gift exchange.

Plan ahead. Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.

Learn to say no. Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity. If it's not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.



Information source: Mayo Clinic, mayoclinic.org and Central Counties Services Mental Health staff.



Don't abandon healthy habits. Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt.

Try these suggestions:

- Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Incorporate regular physical activity into each day.

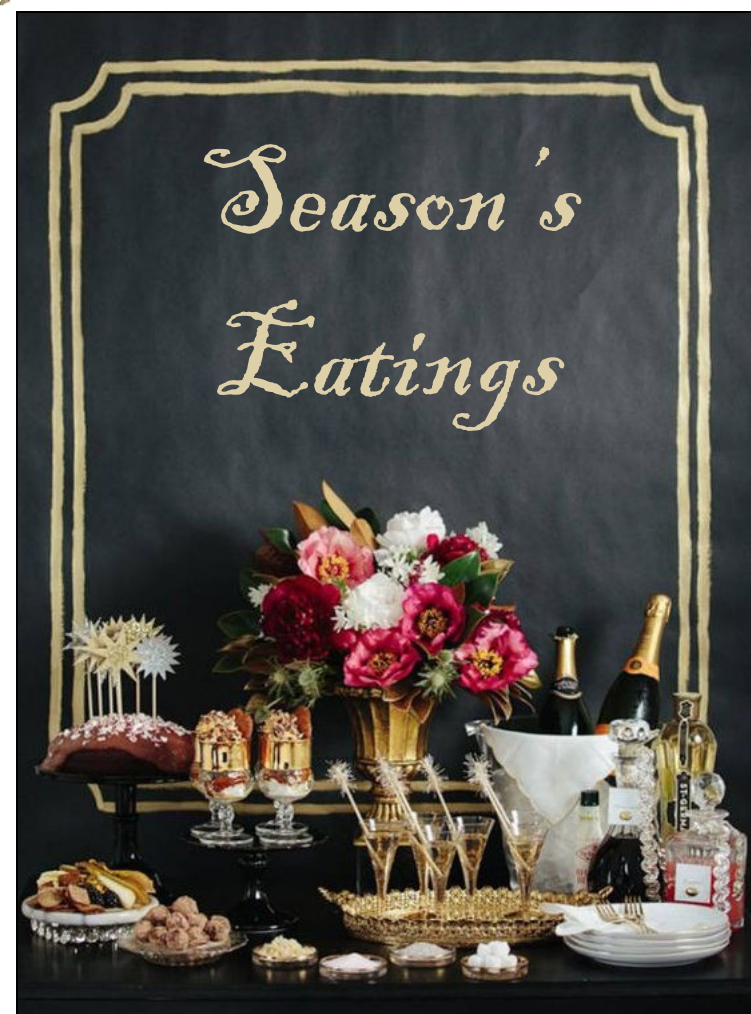
Take a breather. Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.

Some options may include:

- Taking a walk at night and stargazing.
- Listening to soothing music.
- Getting a massage.
- Reading a book.

Seek professional help if you need it. Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Take control of the holidays. Don't let the holidays become something you dread. Instead, take steps to prevent the stress and depression that can descend during the holidays. Learn to recognize your holiday triggers, such as financial pressures or personal demands, so you can combat them before they lead to a meltdown. With a little planning and some positive thinking, you can find peace and joy during the holidays.



Practice healthy eating and workout habits for the holidays

This time of year can be difficult when you are doing your best to eat well for your mental and physical health. Here are some tips to get you through the difficult times:

- Contribute a healthy dish to a gathering to ensure there's something you can indulge in.
- To cut down on the lure of the food court, never go to the mall or the grocery store on an empty stomach.
- Keep a food diary to help you stay committed to your goals during this risky eating period.
- Before going out, have a healthy snack to curb your appetite.
- Stash healthy foods at work so you're not as tempted by the treats piling up at the workplace.
- Take sensible portions so you don't end up eating too much.
- Eat with a small group of people when you can and sit next to other healthy eaters.
- Break up your workout routine into 10-15 minute sessions throughout the day.
- Plan in advance to eat a little more and be a little more flexible at this time of year, when you face daily temptations.
- Instead of wasting calories on foods that you can have at any time of the year, pick items that are truly special and unique to the season as "cheat foods."

Information source: Mayo Clinic, mayoclinic.org and Central Counties Services Mental Health staff.

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