Find Holiday Cheer Despite Stress of the Season

It’s the most wonderful time of the year, or so the classic Christmas song would have us believe.

But the holidays are also a hectic time when hype and commercialism, unreasonable expectations, and lack of money and time cause more stress than usual. “Good cheer” can be elusive when we’re trying to make perfect holiday memories for ourselves and our loved ones.

The holidays are generally a joyful time, when people report focusing more on friends, family, and faith. A 2006 survey by research and consulting firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner found that 60 percent of Americans are in “high spirits” during the holidays.

The idea that suicides peak during the holiday is a long-standing myth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. suicide rate is actually lowest in December.

But rates of depression and anxiety do increase, especially among those who:
- have a mood disorder or experience depression at other times of the year;
- are isolated and don’t have a good social support system;
- have recently experienced trauma, illness, or life changes;
- drink too much alcohol; or
- struggle with finances.

A 2015 survey conducted by Healthline, a consumer health information website, found that 62 percent of respondents described their stress level as “very or somewhat” higher during the holidays. Women are especially vulnerable, perhaps because they’re more likely to shoulder the dizzying demands of celebrating, like shopping, cooking, and cleaning.

Holiday stress, and our efforts to cope with it, can take a toll on our physical and mental health. Those impacts are aggravated when people turn to unhealthy coping strategies, like “comfort eating,” excessive drinking, and being more sedentary.

There are lots of healthy ways to help you avoid feeling like a Grinch or Scrooge this season. Here are some holiday survival tips recommended by health and mental health experts:

- **Hang on to healthy habits.** Eat and drink in moderation, and get plenty of exercise and sleep. Have a healthy snack before parties so you’re less likely to binge on sweets and other holiday fare.
• **Set realistic goals.** The holidays don’t have to be perfect or just like last year. It’s okay to replace old traditions and rituals with new ones.

• **Make a budget and stick to it.** Don’t try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Spend what you can afford. Consider giving homemade gifts, and seek out free activities.

• **Acknowledge your feelings.** If someone close to you has died recently or you can’t be with loved ones, it’s normal to feel sadness and grief. Take time to express your feelings. You can’t force yourself to be happy just because it’s the holidays.

• **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious, or social groups and events. They can offer comfort and companionship. Helping others can also boost your spirits. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, buy a present for a child in need, or visit residents of a nursing home.

• **Set aside differences.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don’t live up to your expectations. Save the airing of grievances for another time. If things get uncomfortable, get away for a while to simmer down.

• **Learn to say no.** Taking on too many tasks can weigh you down. Delegate as much as possible and manage your time wisely.

• **Make time for yourself.** Spending a little time alone, without distractions, can refresh your spirit. Consider taking a walk, listening to soothing music, getting a massage, or reading a good book.

The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) urges those who already live with a mental health condition to take extra care of themselves during the holidays. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America offers these additional tips for those who already struggle with a mood or anxiety disorder:

• **Cope ahead.** Prepare for worst-case scenarios at work or family gatherings. Decide in advance how long you’ll stay and stick to your plan.

• **Balance activities.** Try to spend some time with others as well as time alone.

• **Find meaning.** Ask yourself what you appreciate most about the holidays and make sure you focus on it.

• **Manage your environment.** Choose people and places that add to your overall well-being rather than deplete or challenge it. Consider attending counseling or support groups. Regular exposure to bright light, particularly fluorescent light, can help prevent or improve symptoms of seasonal affective disorder (SAD).

• **Take care of you.** Avoid mood-altering substances, take medications as prescribed, connect with others, rest, and find enjoyment in your activities.

Remember, if you get a case of the “holiday blues,” it should be temporary. If it follows you into the new year, seek help from a mental health professional. You can find lots of mental health resources on the Montana 211 website at [www.montana211.org](http://www.montana211.org)

We at Lewis and Clark Public Health wish you a healthy and happy holiday season filled with the joy of giving and the comfort of people who care.