



BLACK DOG INSTITUTE

News Release

Depression and the festive season

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Christmas and the holiday season are traditionally times for celebrating with family and friends. However, for many people the festive season is a time of isolation, negative thoughts and increased feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. There are several reasons why this period can increase the risk of depression for some people. Many build up to this time of year with great expectations, only to find disappointment if hopes are not fulfilled. People who are socially isolated, or who have lost a loved one through death or a relationship ending can experience heightened feelings of loneliness or grief.

In addition, financial difficulties, particularly in this economic climate, can be heightened by the pressure to spend over the festive season. The potential for family conflict and the demands of juggling work, shopping and entertaining can also intensify stress at this time. Alcohol consumption often increases in the holiday season, and combined with over-eating and a reduced amount of sleep can contribute to problems with mood.

It is important to take steps to care for your mental health over this period. These include preparing for difficult times, recognising symptoms of depression and seeking help. You do not have to face these problems by yourself.

Hints for coping with the festive season

Have realistic expectations

It is common to aim for the “perfect” Christmas or New Year’s Eve, or to have unrealistic beliefs about the ideal family. There can be a societal pressure to always feel very happy and connected to loved ones in the festive season. However, such unrealistic expectations are likely to lead to disappointment when compared to reality, and can heighten feelings of failure or isolation. Rather, it can be more helpful to have balanced expectations about the holiday season, including the parts that are likely be difficult (e.g. feeling lonely without an ex-partner, or conflict with a family member), and the parts that are likely to be easier or enjoyable (e.g. catching up with an old friend). For those going through a difficult time, it can also be helpful to remember that the festive season is just one period of time, rather than somehow a prediction of the future overall.

Plan for difficult times

For those who expect to feel lonely or isolated during the festive time, plan for ways of connecting with other people. For example, if you do not have anybody to spend Christmas day with, plan an activity, volunteer with a charity and write a list contact numbers of people (including counselling services) you can call. For those who expect family conflict, make a plan of how you can deal with this (e.g. avoid certain situations or go for a brief walk for time out to calm down). For people who have lost a loved one, holidays can re-awaken the grieving process. In this case it can be useful to have a plan of how to cope with feelings associated with grief (e.g. talk to a friend, dedicate an activity to reflect on the time spent with that person).

Keep healthy and exercise

Looking after your body will also help your mood. Eat well (including fruit and vegetables), try to get a good night's sleep and be active. Go for a walk every day. Step outside. Find a physical activity that you enjoy and that suits your level of fitness (e.g. swimming, jogging, or taking the dog for a walk). Research has found that regular exercise can be an effective treatment ([see our Fact Sheet 'Exercise and Depression'](#)) for mild-moderate depression for some people. Also spend time doing other enjoyable activities to relax (e.g. have a massage, listen to music, garden, cook tasty meals).

Limit alcohol and other drugs

There can be a temptation to drink too much in the holiday season, particularly as a way of coping with stress. However, excessive alcohol can fuel arguments and unwanted behaviours, and can lead to mood worsening rather than getting better.

Plan for financial difficulties

If times are tough financially, make a time to sit down as a family and plan a Christmas that is reasonable and realistic. Changes to present and holiday plans may need to be made. See a financial counsellor (e.g. through the [Salvation Army](#) or [Wesley Mission](#)). If gambling is a problem for you, help is available through counsellors and psychologists.

Recognise symptoms of depression

Some symptoms of depression are well known, such as a sad mood, tiredness, lack of enjoyment and loss of motivation. However, it can be helpful to also watch out for other signs of depression, such as appetite changes, being irritable or snappy, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, and reduced sex drive. See the Black Dog Institute website for more information on [symptoms of depression](#), and when and [how to seek help](#).

Look out for others

If you notice changes in the behaviour of somebody you care about, let them know that you are there to listen. Encourage them to see a GP, counsellor or other health professional, and assist them in making the appointment. Be aware of those who may have gone through some difficult changes in the past year, and offer your support. See the Black Dog Institute website www.blackdoginstitute.org.au for more information on [helping someone else](#).

HOW TO SEEK HELP FOR DEPRESSION

- Speak to a friend or family member about how you are feeling.
- See your local General Practitioner (GP), who can conduct an assessment and refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist (with Medicare rebates available).
- Contact your local community mental health service.
- Call **Lifeline** on **13 11 14** (24 hours a day, 7 days per week in Australia) for confidential telephone counselling and referrals, or see www.lifeline.org.au
- Call **Mensline** on **1300 789 978** (for 24-hour confidential telephone support for men) or see www.menslineaus.org.au
- Call **Kids Help Line** on 1800 55 1800 (for 5-18 yrs) or see www.kidshelp.com.au

In the case of a crisis, or if you are having suicidal thoughts:

- Call 000 (police, ambulance) or visit the emergency department of any hospital
- Call **Lifeline** on **13 11 14**