

TAMING THE HOLIDAY BLUES

By Nan Zastrow

This article is from the archives and updated to reflect my feelings today after the death of my beloved husband in January.

Who can ever forget (if you are old enough) when mood rings were the rage. I remember owning several. It was a novelty and a fun thing to do—calculate your mood of the moment. The stone in the ring subtly changes colors based on your own energy that reveals your inner emotions. At that point in my life, my ring generally took on tones of dark blue indicating happiness, love and romance.

If I gave each of my bereaved friends a “mood ring” during the holiday season, the rings would likely turn from tones of blue/green (inner emotions, charged) to gray or black indicating anxiety, nervous strain and tenseness. I know today, I am once again challenged with the tension of the holidays. I went through it once and here I am again feeling the same emotions, resistance, and indecision that I felt all those years ago. It isn't easy to turn it off even if you survived it once before.

Holiday stress happens to many people, not just the bereaved. We all have memories of the “perfect Christmas,” and each holiday we aspire to make this one better than the lesser one that lingers in our minds. (Such as those mandated by COVID.) We create grand expectations and then beat ourselves up trying to meet them. Add the complications of grief to normal holiday stress, and you typically will find a very energy-charged mood that borders on sadness or serious anxiety. It's called the holiday blues.

How do we know that what we are feeling is just the holiday blues and not something more serious? Do you get weepy when you see holiday decorations or hear holiday music? Do you feel rebellious and upset that others are having fun and planning celebrations which you can't/won't be a part of? Are you trying to avoid holiday parties and social get-togethers? Are you anxious about putting out holiday decorations or trimming a tree? Do you just want to run away until it's all over?

Chances are these are normal reactions to the coming holiday season for some bereaved. Physically, mentally, and spiritually, your body is telling you that you aren't ready to cope with the stress.

What causes holiday blues?

We all fantasize that holidays are a time of extreme happiness, good fellowship, family gatherings and energetic plans for the New Year. We relate to seasonal television shows where everything that was “wrong” suddenly becomes “right”. We expect that our lives should be just the same. We hope that we are “touched by angels” and can heroically accept misfortune and death as a fact of life. But many factors can contribute to holiday blues, and some are inescapable.



Some causes of “Holiday Blues” include:

- Death of a loved one now or in years past.
- Overwhelming demands, plans, finances, and other people’s expectations.
- Anticipating the death of someone who is seriously ill.
- Being alone. Feeling cheated of enjoying life, like others.
- Disappointment with current life situations.
- Memories of past holidays and reality of current ones.
- Other life changes: health, job, relationship.

How long do the holiday blues last?

For everyone it will be different. Many people begin feeling blue when the warm days of summer change to the brisk days of fall. The daylight becomes shorter, and the coldness brings on the “hibernation” syndrome. Seasonal traditions can trigger memories like Halloween events/parties, fall hunting season, harvest time and the blessings we remember at Thanksgiving. For some people, it’s only the Christmas holiday that bothers them the most. Unfortunately, that begins in September when the stores start displaying their holiday decorations and gifts. And Deal Days are emphasized on websites. For most people, the great anxiety of the holidays tapers off and life settles down once the New Year’s bell tolls—perhaps symbolic of a clean slate, a new beginning and hope.

What can I do to help me through holiday blues during my difficult time?

Trust that the holiday blues are normal, and they will pass. There isn’t any strategy that works for everyone and probably none that will cure the blues completely. But here are some ideas for taming the holiday blues that I’ve used in the past years to help my family and me. I’m planning to rely on my own advice once again this year.

Taming the “blues” #1: Cancel your expectations; traditions change. The pressure to be “happy” and “merry” over the holidays sometimes creates deeper sadness and loneliness. There are so many expectations to live up to—everyone’s expectations but our own! Accept that it is difficult for family and friends to understand what and how you are feeling. In most cases, it’s not intentional. They want us to be happy like they are, and they think they are doing us a favor by enticing us to join in the merriment. It may be necessary to “ask for understanding and support.” Recognize that all family relationships change over time and so do traditions. So, update your current situation to modify the traditions that will work for you. Your family and friends will also modify their holiday traditions at some time—and not necessarily because of the death of a loved one. You will see that as children grow and go off to college or get married, as parents and spouses die, family celebrations for most families change. While this death in your life is the immediate source of your emptiness and grief, soothe your pain by accepting that changes are inevitable for many reasons.

Taming the “blues” #2: Communicate, but stand your ground. You know you are feeling anxious about the pending holidays. You know what your fears are and what your potential problems will be. The rest of your family and friends don’t know what you are thinking or feeling. If you clue them into your fears, they may try to understand the reason for your actions and decisions. It will be easier for them to accept. However, it’s important to stand your ground. Sometimes, your family and friends

will try to coerce you into doing something you aren't able to handle. If you feel very firmly that this wouldn't be good for you this year, simply say, "I'm sorry. Not this time (this year) but ask me again sometime."

Taming the "blues" #3: Be socially flexible and escape. Don't make plans for social events and dinners too far in advance. But keep the option open to participate. Sometimes it's easier to say, "I'm not going to go to the church recital or to Grandma's for Christmas dinner," because you believe that it would be better to just be alone, but this isn't always true. Feel free to tell people that you are taking one day at a time, one hour at a time, or one event at a time. Most family and friends will respect your need to make a last-minute decision. Also, build in an escape. Drive your own car so when you are ready to leave, you can leave. Notify your host prior to coming that you aren't certain how long you will stay. Prepare an excuse if you feel you need one to allow you to leave with no questions asked. If you feel you really want to hold a social event in your own home over the holidays but aren't sure if you can "handle it," set limits. Invite guests but give them a beginning and ending time such as 7:00-9:00 p.m. Ask a trusted friend to lead the exodus" at a time when you want company to leave. This will give others the hint that it's time to go, and it also allows them permission to leave without offending you. Pre-planning makes the event bearable because you can control whether you go and when you leave. There's no need to skip all of the holiday social events, but I can certainly attest to the fact that often emotions can get in the way. Remember, it's okay to be social; it's okay to laugh and have fun.

Taming the "blues" #4: Decorate your heart first. If your heart tells you that decorating would be nice and would soothe the painful thoughts of the holidays, by all means decorate to your heart's content. If decorations and the thought of them scare you, don't put out any more decorations than your emotions will tolerate. In other words, do only what is comfortable for you this year. If a nativity instills the real meaning of Christmas, put it up. If a tree with keepsake ornaments is painful, forget the tree this year. I tortured myself the first year, but I felt I was making a sacrifice for my family. My daughter and Chad had received a keepsake ornament every year that was theme based. Jalane wanted to put the "kids" tree up; Gary thought it might be good for me. I did it, in private, and cried through every keepsake ornament I hung. Once the tree was decorated—a few days later—it was a source of loving memories. I didn't hang stockings. I didn't send holiday cards. I didn't attend the usual church and social events. I didn't bake cookies. I struggled with buying simple gifts. I didn't watch the favorite holiday videos. I didn't put out my Santa collection, but I did add to my angel collection. These were some of my limitations and my sources of comfort. This year, new again to grief, I haven't made those decisions. But there will be many. Things are very different again.



Taming the “blues” #5: Seek support, not sympathy. Rethink your attitudes about the holiday season and be honest with yourself. Are you rebelling because you are feeling sorry for yourself? Or are you truly feeling helpless, blue, and in need of quiet, private time to sort out your thoughts? Or do you need someone to talk to, give you a hug or spend some time with you? Sympathy will come automatically. How could anyone who cares about you not sympathize with the loss you are feeling? I don't believe for a moment that a loving human being can deny the evidence of pain and deliberately withhold comfort. Disarm your feeling of helplessness and use the feeling of sympathy to gain control. Ask for support. This is something everyone can relate to and rally around. People want to help, so tell them what they can do to help you. If your blues are part of multiple past losses, and you are feeling the magnitude of loss, recognize that when you grieve wholly, you will be able to experience good feelings when you reminisce. You may feel a twinge of sadness, but the deep pain will recede. Coping with and enjoying the holidays doesn't mean that you don't miss the person who was a special part of your life. Nor does it mean that you don't miss times the way they used to be. It means that you will continue to live after this difficult change. And you will honor the memory of your loved one in new ways. Surround yourself with people who understand that the holidays may increase your grief and you need their loving support that honors your feelings and helps you express your grief as needed.

Taming the “blues” #6: Forget words; find ritual. This is a lesson we learned repeatedly from Dr. Alan Wolfelt. Rituals can emphasize loving memories and give expression to feelings far beyond our vocabularies. As an individual or as a family, find a ritual that demonstrates your heartfelt feelings and do it! “Memories are your keepsakes, No one can take them away from you.” Take some time during the holidays to talk about good memories, share pictures, light a candle, place a wreath, contribute to a charity, or anything else that makes you feel good!

Taming the “blues” #7: Seek treasures of the soul. Going forward into the New Year is often difficult, but it can also be a time for cleansing and rejuvenation. Spend some time thinking about your recent experiences. What does it mean in your present and future life? Think about purpose and assess yourself as an individual. How can you help others through difficult times? Think about the positive things in your life and how you can use them to help you cope. Find a renewed sense of faith or discover a new meaning for existence.

Taming the “blues” #8: When the giving hurts, keep on giving. We are nurtured to believe that when something hurts, it's time to pull back, quit or change what we are doing. Not a holiday has passed since Chad's death in 1993 that hasn't caused me to hurt in some way. Over the years, Gary and I soothed the pain by “giving back.” We've hosted dozens of “When the Holidays Hurt” programs for the community. We've walked in their shoes. Every community has programs and events to subsidize those who need a little help to make their holidays comfortable. Find one and get involved. Ramp up your charity donations. Ring the bell for the Salvation Army. Sing in the choir at church. Pick a name from a “Giving Tree” and purchase a gift. Giving of self to others is by far the best antidote for holiday blues. When you wipe away the tears, clear the frog in your throat and calm the racing of your heart, you know what love and true joy are all about. There is no louder message that speaks of infinite peace on earth, goodwill to men.