Joy to the world! ‘Tis the season to be jolly! Festive music fills the air; holiday cheer abounds. Everyone is happy at holiday time — right? Wrong. Truth be told, many people feel lonely, sad, anxious and depressed at this time of year. How can this be?

There are many reasons why people feel down at holiday time. Here are the key causes for the holiday blues:

- **Pressure to feel merry:** Do you feel joyous when holiday decorations go up and store windows fill with gifts? If you don’t, take comfort in knowing that you are not alone. The disparity between how you actually feel and what you think you are supposed to feel can cause you guilt and confusion. This phenomenon can start you off on the wrong foot, even before the festivities begin.

- **Remembrances of holidays past:** Consciously or unconsciously, you have a mental record of previous holidays. Your mood may be contaminated by the specter of sad holidays past. If your current life circumstances are unhappy, however, you may long for the happy holidays you once enjoyed.

- **Reminders of loved ones lost:** Holidays are a time for reflection. All too often your thoughts turn to beloved family members and friends who have passed away. The subsequent sense of loss you feel can spoil even the happiest of celebrations.

- **Loneliness:** Holidays can be dreadfully lonely if you don’t have a significant other. Additionally, separation from family members (emotional or geographic) can be particularly painful at this time of year.

- **Financial hardship:** One of the joys of the holiday season is to give to others. If your financial resources are severely limited at this time of year you are likely to feel insufficient, and as though you are “on the outside looking in.”

- **In search of sunlight:** Many people are adversely impacted by the relative loss of sunlight they experience during the winter months. This phenomenon even has a name: seasonal affective disorder or SAD. Your holiday blues will only be exacerbated by limited sunshine.

Do any of these reasons for feeling bummed sound familiar? Don’t despair. Here are some ways for you to effectively beat those holiday blues:

- **It’s OK to feel what you feel:** If you don’t feel as happy as you think you should, don’t fight it. Forcing feelings that aren’t there will only make matters worse, and there really aren’t any “shoulds” about it.

- **Seek sun and endorphins:** If you find yourself feeling blue, be sure to get at least 20 minutes of sunlight each day. This isn’t always easy to do when winter weather hits, but do your best. And don’t forget to exercise. Both sunlight and exercise help to fight any chemical causes for your holiday funk.

- **Help someone else:** It’s hard to feel down while you are busy helping someone else. Volunteer at a soup kitchen, wrap gifts for unfortunate kids, or spend time with
an elderly relative or friend. Instead of feeling glum you’ll find yourself experiencing what the holidays are really about: Giving to others.

- **Create your own traditions:** Contrary to popular opinion, there are no rules for how you spend your holidays. So if old traditions bring up unhappy memories, start new ones. If you don’t have family, share the holidays with good friends. Don’t wait for them to include you; make them welcome in your home instead. If cooking a Christmas dinner feels like a drag, do brunch. If going to a synagogue or a church service dampens your spirits, have your own worship service outdoors, at home or wherever you wish.

- **Stay busy and avoid unstructured time:** If you know the holidays are difficult for you, why not plan ahead and minimize your difficult feelings. Try to fill your calendar with fun events. Too much time spent alone may bring you to an old, familiar place: down.

Now here’s the most important thing you can do to beat those blues: No matter what is happening in your life, think of the blessings you do have. Taking stock of all of the positives in your life — right here and now — can go a long way toward ending your “bah humbug” mood.

With a little bit of planning and forethought, the holidays can be wonderful — and not because they are supposed to be.