

# 8 Ways to Keep Your Sanity During the Holidays

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The weather outside might be frightful but inside it's definitely worse. According to New York psychologist Jay Seitz, 25 percent of people experience some kind of holiday anxiety or depression. That is, one in four people sipping eggnog feel like that stale, bland, unpopular fruitcake that was re-gifted five times before it was fed to the neighbor's cat on Christmas Eve. Yes, the holidays do bring a magic and excitement to the month of December, but the stress, loneliness, and blues pre-packaged with the festivities can be enough to drag a quarter of us across the tenuous line from sanity to insanity.

Here are eight tips intended to keep you from hurling the mistletoe at Uncle Fred because he asked for the butter in the wrong tone of voice.

## 1. Find your kind of people

The good/bad news of holiday depression is that so many people suffer from it that it's easy to find a person with whom to relate. It's unfortunate that one-fourth of the US population would prefer to skip the month on December. However, this means that people who hide from carolers are certainly not alone—and, if they join up with the folks chucking holiday letters in the trash unopened, they will feel a companionship that can definitely lift their moods. The trick is identifying this 25 percent.

Here's a hint. They are typically the ones who don't say much after the question, "How are you?" Or, if they do, their response is something like, "Okay... How are you?," which is code for "How the hell do you think I am?" Stick with them.

## 2. Embrace your inner slacker

Stress is usually the biggest culprit behind the holiday blues. Stress does bad, bad, bad things to your body, places toxins into your bloodstream, whacks out your heart and other organs. It produces hormones that can change your personality from that of June Cleaver to Sybil.

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So your biggest chance at combating holiday anxiety and depression is to eliminate as much stress as you can. And at that statement you just rolled your eyes, like I do every time my mom or my husband says that to me. I look at my to-do list and each item whispers, "You can't cut me. You need me, remember?"

That's when I take the red pen and start marking up the page. Christmas cards. Do I REALLY need to send 250 of them? No. Do I even need to send 50? Not really. Let's put that on the "Would be nice if I have time" list. In other words, you need to embrace your inner slacker, and tell her that you need her help this holiday season.

### **3. Slow your breath**

Slowing down your breath is one of those easy, simple strategies to boost your mood that seems too easy and simple to work. But it does. Because the first thing we do, as a sort of knee-jerk reaction, when we are stressed is speed up our breathing, and start breathing from the chest instead of the diaphragm, which supplies more oxygen to our brain cells. I use the most basic of breathing exercises called the "Four Step" method. You don't have to do anything but count to four as you breathe in, count to four holding your breath, count to four breathing out, and count to four while resting. Then do it again. If you were unable to follow that, you might want to make an appointment with a professional. If that doesn't, you know, stress you out.

### **4. Watch the Inner Critic**

You know the little Elf on the Shelf that comes out every holiday season and moves about the house before breakfast each morning? He is supposed to overhear conversations of holiday gift lists, etc. so that he can report back to Santa. Yeah, well, during the holidays, another little guy comes out, too, and he is called the Inner Critic. However, unlike the Little Elf, this twerp is invisible and resides somewhere in the gray mater of your brain. He likes to convince you that you are lazy, weak, stupid, unlovable, ugly, unsuccessful, and basically every other insult you have called yourself over the years. There is no rationale behind his statements. He just likes to make you feel insecure. And he does a great job of it during the holidays. This is his season! But if you watch out for him, and identify his voice before you go one believing his lies, you will save a bit of the self-esteem and confidence you will need to get through your holiday get-togethers.

### **5. Prepare for idiots**

Just as there exists an Inner Critic inside all of us, there also exists idiots outside of us. I'm poking fun a little, but this is a universal truth, and the truth shall ultimately set you free, or at least help you defend yourself this holiday season. If you can identify the idiots, you can brace yourself for their unintentional (or intentional) attacks. In my piece, "The Idiot's Guide to Dealing with Idiots," I give a few pointers on how to manage interactions with folks lacking the open-mindedness, intelligence, or empathy needed for a healthy conversation. I like to envision myself in a bubble, protected from any toxin trying to penetrate my being. I also allow time for recovery after seeing an idiot, because chances are good that I will need to do something that reminds me that her assessment of me isn't accurate.

## **6. Be sure to laugh**

Laughing is as important as eating lots of salmon and spinach (rich in Omega-3 fatty acids that my brain needs) and regular exercise. Humor is a powerful healing element for me (and I surmise for everyone) because it allows me to see a situation from the right perspective. That is why I make sure and post fun stuff on Beyond Blue during December that has the potential to invoke some harsh comments from folks that really need a better sense of humor: The 12 Bipolar Days of Christmas, Christmas Carols and Disorders, and The Dysfunctional Holiday Letter. Let's face it: If you are not laughing at a holiday letter that discusses at length the successful potty training of triplets or a best-selling memoir composed at the top of Mount Everest, then you are losing out on some great holiday fun.

## **7. Spot holiday thinking**

So we have now identified the Inner Critic and the idiot, losers that can make you grit your teeth every time you hear a Christmas carol. There is a third enemy that is part of the Holiday Axis of Evil: stinking holiday thinking. Related to the other two bad boys, this kind of thinking surfaces during the month of December to sabotage your holiday spirit. However, knowing how to untwist the distorted thinking will release you from its negative energy.

Dr. David Burns names ten forms of distorted thinking in his bestseller "Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy." My favorites are black and white thinking, jumping to conclusions, mindreading, overgeneralization, and saying "should" WAY too much. ("I SHOULD bake Christmas cookies for the whole neighborhood like Mrs. Johnson does every year.")

Burns offers 15 techniques to untwist the distortions. The most helpful for me is to "record the evidence," an exercise in documenting how things really are, not how they seem to be in one of your insecure moments.

## **8. Acknowledge the loneliness**

For some reason, it seems like most deaths or break-ups happen around the holidays. So the memories of losing a loved one also fall around December. The sense of loss and loneliness can be overwhelming at this time because every few feet you run into a holiday advertisement gracing a couple wrapped in each other's arms — wide, Colgate smiles — with an angelic baby, adorable puppy, or exquisite diamond necklace in the picture. For anyone estranged in any way from a significant other or loved ones, this can pour salt in very fresh wounds.

I don't have any quick tips for this one. But I do take some solace in knowing that everyone — well, except for the idiots — suffer, in some way, from loneliness or loss around the holidays. Just as it is a season of celebrating the many gifts in our lives, it also can be a time that calls to mind what pains us. And just knowing that I'm not alone in that cycle... well, it gives me peace.