

News

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****Holiday blues are normal sometimes

If you're not feeling very merry this holiday season when everyone around you seems to be happy, don't be too concerned. Some sadness around the holidays is common and such feelings are normal, say two psychiatrists at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

"The holiday season, which stretches from Thanksgiving through Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's, is a time filled with anniversaries of a sort," explained John Debus, M.D. "Many of our dearest memories of family and friends are associated with special holiday gatherings. And if these people are no longer with us--due to death, geographic distance or the end of the relationship--it's not unusual for a memory to trigger a strong grief reaction, a sort of 'Ghost of Christmas Past.'"

Dr. Debus is assistant director of the psychiatric unit at the new Zale Lipshy University Hospital, a private teaching, referral and research facility for UT Southwestern. He is an assistant professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern.

"It's also a time when people step back and assess where they are

(More)

Blue--2

in their lives," he continued, "a time when they just naturally take a look at what they've accomplished."

The psychiatric unit's medical director, Rodrick Gregory, M.D., agrees. "It sometimes helps to focus on the happiness surrounding the memories rather than the loss," he suggested. Dr. Gregory is an assistant professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern.

It also helps to realize that life is not all fun and festival, even during holidays. There is value to be found in the sadness of life, Dr. Debus pointed out. Nostalgic feelings about other places and other times, missing loved ones, grieving for the losses in our lives, all can add texture and depth to the present, he said.

Some people get the holiday blues because they can't meet their own expectations or those of others, Dr. Debus went on to say. They measure themselves against the ads on TV and in magazines that show the "perfect" family having the "perfect" holiday celebration, and they feel like failures.

"The people in the ads look like they have such a nice family and like they have a lot of money. They're nicely dressed, live in a beautiful house and are sitting around a decorator-done tree surrounded with hundreds of gifts, explained Debus. "This may make you feel bad: maybe you've got a nice family, but you don't have any money. Or maybe you've got money, but your family no longer interacts," he said.

People need to realize that there is no ideal "Leave It to Beaver" family nor "perfect" holiday celebration and not place too many expectations on themselves and other family members, he advised.

Both therapists agree that women in particular--especially working mothers--tend to expect too much of themselves during the holidays.

(More)

Other family members often accelerate the stress by expecting Mom to "make it happen," doing most of the gift-buying, the wrapping, the decorating and the cooking. Sharing these chores is healthier because the shared projects become part of the holiday fun for everyone as well as relieving the pressure on mother.

Single people, or family members who live great distances from home, may find themselves feeling lonely during the holidays. One solution is to plan a cruise or a trip to Europe and give themselves a new--and happy--holiday memory.

Some families also find that taking a vacation during the holidays can relieve the pressure of holiday expectations.

If you can't or don't want to go away for the holidays and don't want to be alone, speak up. You'll be surprised how eager friends will be to include you in their family celebrations. Another option is to participate in activities that help others, such as volunteering at a hospital or shelter for the homeless.

The holiday season often brings conflict to young couples over which set of parents to visit. It helps to try to work out such decisions well in advance so everyone involved can be informed before expectations are set. If the conflict arises year after year, one solution is to plan your own holiday celebrations and do your visiting at other times of the year, substituting phone calls, gifts and photographs for your physical presence on the holiday.

The important thing to remember is that a little depression or sadness is normal during the holidays, even when we're enjoying the season. However, serious depression is an entirely different matter; it's not just a spell of seasonal blues. It's a low mood that doesn't go away for a long time, and it is accompanied by changes in people's

(More)

ability to function in their usual ways.

Some of the other symptoms of a more serious kind of depression include changes in appetite, either overeating or losing your taste for food; changes in sleep patterns, developing insomnia or sleeping more than usual; lack of energy or feeling weak; lack of interest in things one used to enjoy, including sex; morbid thoughts, even of suicide; negative thinking; indecisiveness; and poor concentration.

Dr. Debus said the best rule is "when in doubt, check it out." If you are feeling depressed and have been feeling that way for a number of weeks, he suggests that you ask yourself the following questions: Is this feeling different from my usual feelings at this time of year? Does this feel normal to me? Are the depressed feelings interfering with my daily functioning? Am I having thoughts of death or feel that life is not worth living?

If you answer "yes" to any of these questions, perhaps you are experiencing more than just a normal holiday sadness, he said. Or if you have been blaming your depression on problems with your spouse, your children or your job, ask yourself whether these are stresses you'd been managing before that suddenly seem "too much." If so, perhaps you should look at depression as a cause of your low mood and seek help, said Dr. Debus, especially if these feelings don't go away after several weeks' time.

In any case, remember that depression is a treatable condition, and more people are being helped each day as new and better therapies are developed, stressed the physicians.

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Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.