

PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

Brought to you by The South African Depression and Anxiety Group



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Coping with depression over the festive season

Although Christmas is traditionally a time of fellowship and joy, for many the festive season represents a time of loneliness and misery, frustrated by painful memories.

For people on their own, Christmas can be the loneliest time of the year and a period to be dreaded, especially if it is the first holiday after the death of a loved one. For others, Christmas may be a melancholic reminder of happier times that may have passed. According to Wendy Walters, a social worker at the University of Alabama's Hospice program, a loss is felt even more acutely at this time of year because the person's absence is so conspicuous at family gatherings, and people who are grieving often find it difficult to allow themselves to enjoy the festive season. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Christmas may be a time of family hell for some people, as they are forced to entertain difficult family members, or make polite conversation with people who are not well tolerated.

All this anxiety can lead to depression, and for depressed people, who already find it difficult to socialize and to experience any joy in company, Christmas can be an especially trying time, and they may feel more isolated than ever.

According to Johannesburg psychologist, Colinde Linda: "There are those people who dread this time of year, and the incidence of depression (as well as suicide) is very high. The people I'm referring to are those who've had a recent loss - like a death or children who have emigrated, even those without a support network of family and friends. These people often rely on work to provide them with company, so December holidays are a time of isolation and loneliness."

To cope with this Christmas stress, many people turn to food, over-the-counter medications, or drink too much to try to feel more cheerful, using alcohol as a form of "self-medication". It is important to remember though that the initial euphoria and sociability soon disappears, and the combination of lowered inhibitions, old resentments and alcohol can lead to quarrels and injured feelings. Colinde Linda states: "It is a 'quick-fix', so when you're sober again you have the side effects of drinking - dehydration, slowed mental processes, nausea and depression. Alcohol also interferes with sleep, especially in that you don't dream when drunk - which is very unhealthy for a brain." The prolonged use of excessive amounts of alcohol aggravates depression, and leads to anxiety and depression in people who were not formerly depressed. Alcohol and depression do not mix.

To cope throughout this time of turmoil, it is best to be prepared and to plan your Christmas. There are a few tips to survive the festive season:

Difficult relatives

If the problem is that you have relatives that you don't get on with, plan to spend only a short while with them. Perhaps plan a vacation for which you leave on Boxing Day. This also applies if you have relatives that tend to outstay their welcome - plan a holiday to get away from the house on time.

Money

Don't spend more than you can afford. The spirit of Christmas is not found in expensive gifts and extravagant foods. The debts you incur are likely to cause an anxious beginning to the new year. Rather leave some money over.

Alcohol

Remember that alcohol is essentially a depressant. Excessive amounts will not help you cope and could worsen the situation.

Loneliness

There are a number of options to choose from to make your Christmas bearable if you are alone:

- Find out in advance if there are any local get-togethers and plan to go
- Telephone friends and family
- Plan small treats for yourself
- Put your feet up and enjoy the festivities on the TV and radio
- Try taking a cheap holiday - be in a new surrounding
- Spend the time in as unChristmassy a way as possible - spring cleaning, gardening or DIY
- Visit those in hospice, hospitals, old age homes or children who are also lonely over christmas

SELF HELP FOR DEPRESSION

1. Trying to deal with your pain on your own can only serve to perpetuate your feelings of aloneness. Share your feelings with others rather than bottling them up.

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2. Increase positive contact. Although you may want to be alone, you may feel better if you try to take part in some activities you previously enjoyed with your family and friends. Try and avoid situations that may result in negative feelings.
 3. Set yourself a daily routine and try as much as possible to maintain that routine. You may not be able to do all your usual activities, so be sure to set a routine that is realistic.
 4. Learn to make small goals that are attainable. Once achieved, use positive self-talk to make yourself feel good about your achievement. Self-criticism must be minimised.
 5. Avoid making life-changing decisions, such as changing jobs or ending a relationship, until you are feeling better.
 6. Change your lifestyle: most people suffering from depression have been found to be perfectionists and drive themselves much too hard. You may need to learn to lower impossible standards. Try and reduce your workload in order to live your life at a slower pace.
 7. Exercise: Depression often leads to exhaustion and lack of motivation. Despite this, any form of physical exercise, however small, will often have beneficial results. If some exercise can be taken in the fresh air, this can add to the benefit. Walk the dog!
 8. Diet is important. Under or over eating is a symptom of depression. It is essential to have a well balanced diet that prevents tiredness and feeling run down.
 9. Relaxation: You may become irritable and ultra-sensitive. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, breathing exercises, audiotapes, massage, etc. are all effective ways of allaying anxiety and tension that may accompany your depression.
 10. Read books: learning about and understanding the nature of the condition and its possible causes, will help to remove much of the fear, guilt and misconception which many people have. Get a broader picture by reading as many books as possible. Give them to relatives and friends to read. This will help them to understand the illness.
 11. Avoid props, such as smoking, illicit drugs and dependency on alcohol. Alcohol in particular is a depressant and despite giving a temporary lift, it can worsen your depression.
 12. Join a support group. A support group is the first place you can go where everyone understands and no one judges. Knowing that someone else truly understands by having been there, brings a sense of relief.
 13. Remember: seeking treatment is a sign of strength, and is the first step to feeling better.
 14. Don't expect too much from yourself right away. Feeling better takes time. Keep your expectations realistic. It is usually not possible to resolve an issue or change a long life pattern overnight.

Remember that there are people to talk to, who are willing to listen and to help. Trained telephone counsellors at the Depression and Anxiety Support Group can be contacted between 8am and 8pm - Monday to Friday, and between 8am and 1pm on Saturdays. The numbers are (011) 783-1474/6. They are open over Christmas and New Year.