

How Can I Keep My Holidays From Being Blue? **David W. Fairbanks, MD**

We have all heard the song “I’ll have a blue ...” Why are they blue? Largely it is because of our beliefs surrounding what the holidays should be like - we expect them to be perfect like Clark Griswold in the movie Christmas Vacation.

Many things are contributing to the physical and emotional stressors that accompany the holidays:

1. Too little light at this time of year
2. Too little warmth with colder weather
3. Too much time alone
4. Too little time alone
5. Too little exercise
6. Too little time to do everything
7. Too many commitments
8. Too little family with separation from loved ones in distance or death
9. Too much family with close quarters and family conflict
10. Too little sleep
11. Too much food
12. Too much alcohol
13. Too much spending
14. Too many expectations for a perfect holiday

So may I offer some suggestions to help you enjoy your holidays and not get the blues?

Fourteen Gifts Of Holidays

1. Give the gift of LIGHT. Historically many cultures have had celebrations of light to help with the normal physical depression that accompanies shorter days. Arise early and watch the sunrise. This is a powerful reset button on your circadian rhythms and proven to help the winter blues. Also spending time outside in the sun on sunny days is important. If this isn’t possible there are therapeutic light systems that are quite reasonable.
2. Give the gift of WARMTH. Dressing in layers so that one can get outside and enjoy the remaining light is important. Sharing emotional warmth is essential too:
3. Give the gift of SERVICE. When we look outward instead of inward we will find opportunities to share our time and talents. The ghost of Jacob Marley told Scrooge. “Mankind should be our business, Ebenezer, but we seldom attend to it.”

We can do this by thinking less about what we need and focusing on others and perhaps start some traditions of spreading joy:

Acts of kindness

Visiting those in nursing homes and our neighbors who may be lonely

Offering service to someone, friend or family member in need

4. Give the gift of MINDFULNESS. We are human beings not human doings. Spending quiet meditation time is important to recharging your emotional battery. Let go of the past, spend less time worrying about the future and define yourself by living consciously in the present.
5. Give the gift of EXERCISE. A modest increase in your daily routine will help you feel better and offset the indulgence of the season – an extra flight of stairs, parking at the other end of the lot can all add up to better health and sense of wellbeing.
6. Give the gift of TIME PRIORITY. The Ghost of Christmas Present told Scrooge, “There is never enough time to do or say all the things that we would wish. The thing is to try to do as much as you can in the time that you have. Remember Scrooge, time is short, and suddenly, you’re not there any more.” So plan ahead, do what is most important and try not to over commit. Cut out wasted time on social media or with TV.

7. Give the gift of NO. Sometimes we feel like we have to say yes to that office party, that gift exchange or sending cards to everyone we have ever known. If these things bring added value to your life then do them, but remember what's important. Are you ever going to look back and say "I wish I had gone to one more holiday party or sent one more holiday letter?" instead of helping a friend or spending one-on-one time with a spouse or child.
8. Give the gift of GRIEF. We oftentimes don't stop to really grieve the loss of a loved one or come to grips with the disappointments in distance from loved ones. Acknowledge your feelings, reach out to a friend, a support group or professional for support. Look for alternative ways to connect over distance: Google Hangouts, Facetime or a good old telephone call or personal note.
9. Give the gift of RESPECT. Set aside family differences in expectations, beliefs and opinions. Conflict can ruin a holiday event or damage a relationship with someone you love. Remember the old proverb, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Focus on what values you share and build from there. You can respond, "I have come to RESPECT how dedicated you are to your principles, let's talk about this another time."
10. Give the gift of BETTER SLEEP. Keeping a regular schedule, keeping distractions out of the bedroom, keeping the temperature optimal and de-stressing prior to bedtime will help.
11. Give the gift of MODERATION. Pace yourself. You don't have to eat everything at the party or dinner. Pick out only the things you really want to eat. You can always take Tupperware to bring home stuff you would like to eat later. Pick a smaller plate if you can't keep from filling it up.
12. Give the gift of HYDRATION. The body functions better with water. So to avoid effects of alcohol, drink a 16 ounce glass or bottle of water in between each alcoholic beverage. This should improve your function the next day, lessen your headache and improve your sleep. Don't drive intoxicated.
13. Give the gift of BUDGET. Decide ahead of time how much you can afford to spend this holiday and then spend 10% less. Look for simple gifts, homemade gifts, or something that has some emotional sentiment. Debt is a frequent source of pre and post holiday stress.
14. Give the gift of REALITY. Be real. Don't set perfect expectations that beg to disappoint. Remember the movie A Christmas Story? You can always go out to eat Chinese if the meal doesn't turn out right, "Fa la la la la . . ." It's about the relationships and togetherness. No one will remember the perfect holidays, it's always the ones that fail that we look back and laugh – sometimes painfully – about.

Lastly, 'winter depression' or seasonal affective disorder is a real thing, so if you or a family member is having difficulties beyond what a friend or family can help, reach out for professional help. Counselors, pastors and physicians are all trained to recognize and recommend and refer for cognitive and/or medication therapies.



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