



## 25 Ways to Find Joy and Balance During the Holidays

Compliments of Steve Wilson, Psychologist, The Joyologist  
DPC Education Center Advisory Council

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Feeling down during the holidays can be tough, especially since you seem so out of step with the world. Everyone else seems to be beaming, ruddy-cheeked, bursting with holiday spirit. You're feeling wretched and exhausted.

But here's something to cheer you up the next time you're stuck in a room of revelers at a holiday party. Plenty of them are probably unhappy, too.

### Recommendations Related to Depression

Are You at Risk for Depression? <http://bit.ly/2P66jRb-risk>

Knowing what factors increase your risk of having major depression may help you get the best medical help when you need it. Depression treatment is most effective early on.

"I think a lot of people would say that the holidays are the worst time of the year," says Ken Duckworth, MD, medical director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

"They're just straight up miserable, and that's not only for people with clinical depression."

So, if the family gatherings, the endless parties, and the shopping get you down, you're hardly alone. But people with depression—or who have had depression in the past—need to be especially careful when coping with holiday stress. While it might take some conscious effort on your part, you can reduce stress—and maybe even find some holiday joy, too. Here are some tips.

### Finding the Holiday Spirit: Emotions

**1. Keep your expectations modest.** Don't get hung up on what the holidays are *supposed* to be like and how you're *supposed* to feel. If you're comparing your holidays to some abstract greeting card ideal, they'll always come up short. So, don't worry about holiday spirit, and take the holidays as they come.

**2. Do something different.** This year, does the prospect of the usual routine fill you with holiday dread rather than holiday joy? If so, don't surrender to it. Try something

different. Have Thanksgiving at a restaurant. Spend Christmas day at the movie theater. Get your family to agree to skip gifts and instead donate the money to a charity.

**3. Lean on your support system.** If you've been depressed, you need a network of close friends and family to turn to when things get tough, says David Shern, PhD, president and CEO of Mental Health America in Alexandria, Va. So, during the holidays, take time to get together with your support team regularly—or at least keep in touch by phone to keep yourself centered.

**4. Don't assume the worst.** "I think some people go into the holidays with expectations so low that it makes them more depressed," says Duckworth. So, don't start the holiday season anticipating disaster. If you try to take the holidays as they come and limit your expectations—both good and bad—you may enjoy them more.

**5. Forget the unimportant stuff.** Don't run yourself ragged just to live up to holiday tradition. So what if you don't get the lights on the roof this year? So what if you don't get the special Christmas mugs from the crawl space? Give yourself a break. Worrying about such trivial stuff will not add to your holiday spirit.

**6. Volunteer.** Sure, you may feel stressed out and booked up already. But consider taking time to help people who have less than you. Try volunteering at a soup kitchen or working for a toy drive. "You could really find some comfort from it," says Duckworth, "knowing that you're making a small dent in the lives of people who have so little."

**7. Head off problems.** Think about what people or situations trigger your holiday stress and figure out ways to avoid them. If seeing your uncle stresses you out, skip his New Year's party and just stop by for a quick hello on New Year's Day. Instead of staying in your bleak, childhood bedroom at your stepfather's house, check into a nearby hotel. You really have more control than you think.

**8. Ask for help—but be specific.** See if your spouse will lug out the decorations. Ask your sister to help you cook—or host the holiday dinner itself. Invite a friend along on shopping trips. People may be more willing to help out than you expect; they just need some guidance from you on what to do.

**9. Don't worry about things beyond your control.** So your uncle and your dad get into a fight every holiday dinner and it makes you miserable. Remember your limits. You can't control them, but you can control your own reaction to the situation.

**10. Make new family traditions.** People often feel compelled to keep family holiday traditions alive long past the point that anyone's enjoying them. Don't keep them going for their own sake. "Start a new holiday tradition instead," says Gloria Pope, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy at the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance in Chicago. "Create one that's more meaningful to you personally."

**11. Find positive ways to remember loved ones.** Holidays may remind you of the loved ones who aren't around anymore. Instead of feeling glum, do something active to celebrate their memory. For instance, go out with your sisters to your mom's favorite restaurant, and give her a toast.

## **Finding the Holiday Spirit: Parties**

**12. Don't overbook.** "The holidays last for weeks and weeks," says Pope. "People really need to pace themselves or they'll get overwhelmed." So, don't say yes to every invitation willy-nilly. Think about which parties and you can fit in—and which ones you really want to attend.

**13. Don't stay longer than you want.** Going to a party doesn't obligate you to stay until the bitter end. Instead, just drop by for a few minutes, say hello, and explain you have other engagements. The hosts will understand that it's a busy time of year and appreciate your effort. Knowing you have a plan to leave can really ease your anxiety.

**14. Have a partner for the party.** If the prospect of an office party is causing holiday stress, talk to a friend and arrange to arrive—and leave—together. You may feel much better knowing you have an ally and a plan of escape.

**15. Forget about the perfect gift.** If you're already feeling overwhelmed, now is not the time to fret about finding the absolute best gift ever for your great aunt or your mailman. Remember: everybody likes a gift certificate.

**16. Shop online.** Save yourself the inconvenience, the crowds, and the horrors of the mall parking lot by doing the bulk of your shopping online.

**17. Stick to a budget.** The cost of holiday shopping mounts quickly and can make people feel out of control and anxious. So draw up a budget long before you actually start your shopping and stick to it.

## **Finding the Holiday Spirit: Self-Care**

**18. Stay on schedule.** As much as you possibly can, try to stick with your normal routine during the holidays. Don't stay too late at parties. Don't pull an all-nighter wrapping presents. Disrupting your schedule and losing out on sleep can make your mood deteriorate.

**19. Exercise.** While you may not feel like you have the time to exercise during the holidays, the benefits are worth it. "We know that exercise has a pretty strong anti-anxiety, anti-depression effect," says Duckworth. You can work physical activity into your errands. When you're shopping, take a few extra laps around the mall. Walk your Christmas cards to the post office instead of driving.

**20. Eat sensibly.** When you're facing a dozen holiday parties and family gatherings between now and New Year's, it's hard to stay committed to a sensible diet. But try. Eating healthy may keep you feeling better—physically and emotionally. On the other hand, don't beat yourself up if you go overboard on the cookie platter in the break room. It's not a big deal. Just get back on track the next day.

**21. Don't rely on holiday spirits (or other substances.)** "The holidays are a time of heavy drinking," says Duckworth. "It's a common strategy for getting over anxiety about holiday parties or having the boss as your Secret Santa." Remember that alcohol is

itself a depressant and abusing it will leave you feeling worse. It also may not be safe for people taking antidepressant medication, says Pope.

**22. Try a sun lamp.** As the daylight grows shorter, lots of people find their mood gets gloomier. While some have diagnosed seasonal affective disorder (SAD), even people who don't may still have a seasonal aspect to their depression. Talk to your doctor about trying a sun lamp. It could improve your mood.

**23. If you take medication, don't miss doses.** In the hustle of the holidays, it's easy to slack off and miss medication, says Pope. Don't let that happen. Make sure that you're up-to-date on your refills, too.

**24. If you see a therapist, have extra meetings.** To stay grounded, plan ahead and schedule some extra sessions during the holiday season. Or you could ask about the possibility of doing quick phone check-ins.

**25. Give yourself a break.** "The holidays can make some people dwell on their imperfections, their mistakes, the things they're not proud of," Duckworth tells WebMD. But try to cut yourself some slack. "This is not an easy time of year for a lot of people," Duckworth says. "Be gentle with yourself." It is the season of kindness and forgiveness, after all. Save some of it for yourself.

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