

# Beating Holiday Havoc

by Dr. David Gallagher

For those who are 70+ the holiday season has potential for creating physical and emotional havoc. This season is an exciting time of the year – IF you are able to keep your emotions in check. Nearly everyone knows that the holidays add stress and all too often may cause depression.

For the 70+ group there are some special health and emotional challenges. The holiday season could open a variety of psychological, social, spiritual, and physical health concerns for you. For example, your concerns might include dealing with chronic illness or disability, the loss of friends and family members, and your own impending mortality. You might also feel that you do not have the resources, coping skills, or social support to shape your life according to your needs and desires. Concerns about children, grand children or great grand children may be intensified during the holiday season and memories of the loss of a spouse, family member or friend will bring sadness during this season of joy. A simple Christmas carol could trigger an emotional response of sadness and even depression rather than joy.

Depression is one of the most common mental health challenges during the holiday season. You might feel that depression is just a normal part of aging, so you don't seek treatment during this busy time. Depression can be caused by poor eating habits, not getting enough rest, reaction to drugs (toxic depression), physical depression related to glands, infections of the brain and nervous system, hypoglycemia, repression of anger and anger turned inward, self-pity and self-blame or poor self image, or faulty behavior and faulty thinking. Simply being aware of situations that can put you at risk for depression can help you understand the need for help.

These situations include:

Retirement or re-entering the work force due to a stressed economic situation, financial issues, loss through death or relocation of family, friends, or pets, loss or perceived loss of function or capabilities, chronic illness or pain, shopping malls, crowds and traffic.

Also, take note if you or your spouse shows any of these signs of depression

- Constant or pervasive sadness
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Loss of interest in hobbies, friends, or activities
- Change in sleeping habits
- Sudden weight loss or gain

- Frequent visits to the doctor
- Statements such as “You’d be better off without me” or “I don’t want to be a burden.”

At some time, everyone experiences a little depression. We feel down on life and down on ourselves. Sometimes after a bad day or a bad golf game, our moods change briefly. Sometimes depression lingers on. We sometimes just cannot seem to get back up and shake it off.

Some depression involves what’s going on inside, and some involves what’s going on outside. Chemical imbalance in the brain can cause depression. Life events can trigger depression. In addition, the death of a loved one, a strained relationship, drugs, a transition, or even the birth of a grandchild can cause depression and deep grief. When we experience depression, we need help—help from God, his Word, and our friends. Sometimes we need help from a pastor, counselor, or physician.

You can take some specific positive practical steps to climb out of depression (or help someone who is experiencing depression), especially if you’re simply not experiencing the joy you once knew.

If that statement describes how you or your spouse feels, try these ideas:

- Give praise. Rejoicing in the Lord is closely linked in Scripture with praising the Lord: “May all who are godly rejoice in the Lord and praise His holy name!” (Psalm 97:12). It’s easy to become nearsighted and see only your problems. Getting outside, even if only for a simple walk around the block can be a very healthy experience. Being with friends at church, singing praise to the Lord, and engaging in good fellowship can do wonders.
- Read positive Scriptures. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet. He wrote in Jeremiah 15:16, “When I discovered your words, I devoured them. They are my joy and my heart’s delight.” Many of the Psalms also lift the discouraged and depressed heart.
- Pray. Okay, so this sounds cliché. Yet prayer is an amazing means of fighting depression and increasing joy in your life. Jesus said, “You haven’t done this before. Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy” (John 16:24).
- Obey God and serve him. Again, Jesus pointed out the benefits: “When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!” (John 15:10-11)

Additionally, take some practical actions, such as exercising, abdominal breathing, mental relaxation, meditation, muscle relaxation, a warm bath, listening to music, doing something for others, talking it out, family support, revising a daily schedule, or just being with good friends for some fun.

Today you have a choice, to face the holiday season with a positive healthy mindset, gaining hope from Holy Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 9:15 the Apostle Paul wrote, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” In chapter 15 verse 57 Paul encourages us with, “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV)

If you find yourself discouraged or even depressed, a helpful little book that I wrote to bring encouragement is ***Healing Takes Time***. Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005.