



## EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA HEALTH CARE QUALITY UNIT

# IT'S YOUR HEALTH WINTER 2008

## STRESS, DEPRESSION AND THE HOLIDAYS

**Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.**

For some people, the holidays bring unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. In an effort to pull off a perfect Hallmark holiday, you might find yourself facing a dizzying array of demands — work, parties, shopping, baking, cleaning, caring for elderly parents or kids on school break, and scores of other chores. So much for peace and joy, right?

Actually, with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress and depression that often accompany the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.

### TRIGGER POINTS OF HOLIDAY STRESS AND DEPRESSION

Holiday stress and depression are often the result of three main trigger points. Understanding these trigger points can help you plan ahead on how to accommodate them.

The three main trigger points of holiday stress or depression:



**RELATIONSHIPS.** Relationships can cause turmoil, conflict or stress at any time, but tensions are often heightened during the holidays. Family misunderstandings and conflicts can intensify — especially when you are all thrust together for several days. Conflicts are bound to arise with so many different personalities, needs and interests. On the other hand, if you're facing the holidays without a loved one, you may find yourself especially lonely or sad.

**FINANCES.** Like your relationships, your financial situation can cause stress at any time of the year. But overspending during the holidays on gifts, travel, food and entertainment can increase stress as you try to make ends meet while ensuring that everyone on your gift list is happy. You may find yourself in a financial spiral that leaves you with depression symptoms such as hopelessness, sadness and helplessness.



**PHYSICAL DEMANDS.** The strain of shopping, attending social gatherings and preparing holiday meals can wipe you out. Feeling exhausted increases your stress, creating a vicious cycle. Exercise and sleep — good antidotes for stress and fatigue — may take a back seat to chores and errands. High demands, stress, lack of exercise, and overindulgence in food and drink — all are ingredients for holiday illness.



## TIPS TO PREVENT HOLIDAY STRESS AND DEPRESSION

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Try to prevent stress and depression in the first place, especially if you know the holidays have taken an emotional toll in previous years.

Tips you can try to head off holiday stress and depression:



**Acknowledge your feelings.** If a loved one has recently died or you aren't able to be with your loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness or grief. It's OK now and then to take time just to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

**Seek support.** If you feel isolated or down, seek out family members and friends, or community, religious or social services. They can offer support and companionship. Consider volunteering at a community or religious function. Getting involved and helping others can lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. Also, enlist support for organizing holiday gatherings, as well as meal preparation and cleanup. You don't have to go it alone. Don't be a martyr.

**Be realistic.** As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Hold on to those you can and want to. But accept that you may have to let go of others. For example, if your adult children and grandchildren can't all gather at your house as usual, find new ways to celebrate together from afar, such as sharing pictures, e-mails or videotapes.

**Set differences aside.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Practice forgiveness. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. With stress and activity levels high, the holidays might not be conducive to making quality time for relationships. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.

**Stick to a budget.** Before you go shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend on gifts and other items. Then be sure to stick to your budget. If you don't, you could feel anxious and tense for months afterward as you struggle to pay the bills. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.



**Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make one big food-shopping trip. That'll help prevent a last-minute scramble to buy forgotten ingredients — and you'll have time to make another pie, if the first one's a flop. Expect travel delays, especially if you're flying.



**Learn to say no.** Believe it or not, people will understand if you can't do certain projects or activities. If you say yes only to what you really want to do, you'll avoid feeling resentful, bitter and overwhelmed. If it's really not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.

**Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a dietary free-for-all. Some indulgence is okay, but overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and schedule time for physical activity.

**Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Steal away to a quiet place, even if it's to the bathroom for a few moments of solitude. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.





**Rethink resolutions.** Resolutions can set you up for failure if they're unrealistic. Don't resolve to change your whole life to make up for past excess. Instead, try to return to basic, healthy lifestyle routines. Set smaller, more specific goals with a reasonable time frame. Choose only those resolutions that help you feel valuable and that provide more than only fleeting moments of happiness.

**Forget about perfection.** Holiday TV specials are filled with happy endings. But in real life, people don't usually resolve problems within an hour or two. Something always comes up. You may get stuck late at the office and miss your daughter's school play, your sister may dredge up an old argument, your partner may burn the cookies, and your mother may criticize how you're raising the kids. All in the same day. Accept imperfections in yourself and in others.

**Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for several weeks, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. You may have depression.



**Take back control of holiday stress and depression.** Remember, one key to minimizing holiday stress and depression is knowing that the holidays can trigger stress and depression. Accept that things aren't always going to go as planned. Then take active steps to manage stress and depression during the holidays. You may actually enjoy the holidays this year more than you thought you could.



## HEALTH AND SAFETY TIPS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Give the gift of health and safety to yourself and others by following these holiday tips. Sing along to these tips in *The 12 Ways to Health Holiday Song*, listen to them in a holiday health podcast, and send the song to your friends and family in a holiday health-e-card!

1. Wash hands often to keep yourself from spreading germs and getting sick.
2. Bundle up and stay dry to keep warm.
3. Manage stress. Keep a check on over-commitment and over-spending.
4. Don't drink and drive. Don't let anyone else drink and drive.
5. Be smoke-free. Avoid smoking and second-hand smoke.
6. Fasten seat belts while driving or riding in a motor vehicle. Always buckle your child in the car using a child safety seat, booster seat, or seat belt according to the child's height, weight, and age.
7. Get exams and screenings. Ask your health care provider what exams and tests you need to help find diseases and conditions early or before they start.
8. Get your vaccinations. Vaccinations help prevent diseases and save lives.
9. Monitor the children. Keep dangerous toys, food, and household items out of their reach. Make sure toys are used properly.
10. Practice fire safety. Most residential fires occur during the winter months. Never leave fireplaces, stoves, or candles unattended.
11. Prepare food safely. Remember four simple steps: wash hands and surfaces often, avoid cross-contamination, cook foods to proper temperatures, and refrigerate promptly.
12. Eat healthy, and get moving. Limit your portion sizes and foods high in fat and sugar. Get at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most, preferably all, days of the week.

# LONELINESS DURING HOLIDAYS

Loneliness, depression, and low self esteem can all interlink to create a great deal of pain during the holidays. Loneliness can feel like, "Nobody cares about me." Loneliness can occur when experiencing the loss of spending the holidays with loved ones that are no longer around due to death or distance. Loneliness and sadness can develop into depression and can be very painful. Often, when we are lonely we begin to engage in negative self talk or blaming ourselves. This negative self talk creates or exacerbates low self esteem and can deepen depression. Many of the things you can do to avoid loneliness are also ways to increase self esteem and avoid depression.

## WHAT BRINGS IT ON?

### GRIEF & LOSS

Loss of a friend, spouse, your health, job, or independence stirs an emotional reaction called grief and can make you feel sad or down. All of these can make you feel alone and depressed. During holidays there is a pressure to feel joyful and excited which contradicts what you are actually feeling. It is common to get self critical for not feeling the way you "should" be feeling when it would be healthier to accept your feelings for what they are.

### CHANGE OF ROLES

Throughout our lives we create roles for ourselves, mother, father, boss, student, child, caretaker, etc. Our roles and rules about life, family, and the holidays change as we grow older. Some people accept and embrace these changes and others have a harder time with the change in the family structure or routine. We are creatures of habit and many people fear change or fear the unknown. If you are the one who has always held family gatherings at your house, and cannot anymore, or another family member is unable or unwilling to travel, is a difficult adjustment and can result in your feeling helpless or lonely; striving to make the holidays just like every other in years past. Sometimes the more pressure we put on something to be the same, the more disappointment we can experience, and disappointed expectations are another reason to feel sad or depressed.

### EXPECTATIONS

Most people have a list of rules in their head about how people "should" behave, what "should" happen, what you "should" be doing or "should" be feeling. When we place these expectations on ourselves, we are not dealing with the reality of what **IS**. As a result, we wind up feeling disappointed in ourselves and others. Media, especially television, promotes societal "shoulds" about how to act, feel, what to buy, etc. It is up to you to determine what is important to you, not others.

### NEGATIVE FOCUS

When we spend time focusing on all the reasons why we have it so bad, it is very hard to see the forest for the trees, and the negativity is contagious. One thing leads to another. This doesn't mean to ignore things that are wrong, but rather, to try to also accept that there are positives to be found amidst the negatives. Finding the positive can lead to feeling better.

### FEAR OF CHANGE

Sometimes people get stuck in old rules and old roles for fear of trying something new and challenging one's self to step outside your comfort zone. The value in taking risks and challenging yourself to do things differently than before is that whenever you do, you increase your positive feelings about yourself. Most fears are not realistic but do leave you feeling helpless and hopeless which will keep you stuck in depression and loneliness.



# Links to Check Out

## **CDC Features-February is American Heart Month**

<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/HeartMonth/>

## **MayoClinic**

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress/MH00030>

## **CDC—Extreme Cold, A Prevention Guide to Promote your Personal Health and Safety**

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/winter/guide.asp>

## **National Fire Protection Association**

<http://www.nfpa.org/itemDetail.asp?categoryID=301&itemID=19027&URL=Research%20&%20Reports/Fact%20sheets/Seasonal%20safety/Winter/holiday%20safety&cookie%5Ftest=1>

## **CDC—Health and Safety Tips for the Holidays**

<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/HolidayTips/>

## **FDA— Food Safety Tips for Healthy Holidays**

<http://www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/foodsafetytips111307.html>

## **Seasonal Affective Disorder**

<http://www.iparentingfitness.com/articles/mental-fitness/seasonal-affective-disorder-3900/>

## **Seasonal Safety**

<http://www.grandparentstoday.com/articles/holiday-winter/seasonal-safety-2609/>



## FEBRUARY IS AMERICAN HEART MONTH

Although heart disease is sometimes thought of as a "man's disease", it is the leading cause of death for both women and men in the United States. Reduce your chance of developing coronary heart disease by taking steps to prevent and control risk factors. Knowing the signs and symptoms of heart attack are crucial to the most positive outcomes after having a heart attack.

The most common heart disease in the United States is **coronary heart disease**, which often appears as a heart attack. In 2008, an estimated 770,000 Americans will have a new coronary attack, and about 430,000 will have a recurrent attack. About every 26 seconds, an American will have a coronary event, and about one every minute will die from a coronary event.

### DISEASES AND CONDITIONS THAT PUT YOUR HEART AT RISK

Other conditions that affect your heart or increase your risk of death or disability include arrhythmia, heart failure, and peripheral artery disease (PAD). High cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, tobacco, and secondhand smoke are also risk factors associated with heart disease.

### KNOW YOUR SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Some heart attacks are sudden and intense; however, most heart attacks start slowly, with mild pain or discomfort. Often people affected aren't sure what's wrong and wait too long before getting help. Here are signs that can mean a heart attack is happening:

- **Chest discomfort.** Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain.
- **Discomfort in other areas of the upper body.** Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach.
- **Shortness of breath.** May occur with or without chest discomfort.
- **Other signs.** These may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea, or lightheadedness.

### HEALTHY LIFESTYLE: DIET AND NUTRITION, EXERCISE AND FITNESS

A healthy diet and lifestyle are the best weapons you have to fight heart disease. Many people make it harder than it is. It is important to remember that it is the overall pattern of the choices you make that counts. As you make daily food choices, base your eating pattern on these American Heart Association recommendations:

- Choose lean meats and poultry without skin and prepare them without added saturated and trans fat.
- Select fat-free, 1% fat, and low-fat dairy products.
- Cut back on foods containing partially hydrogenated vegetable oils to reduce trans fat in your diet.
- Cut back on foods high in dietary cholesterol. Aim to eat less than 300 mg of cholesterol each day.
- Cut back on beverages and foods with added sugars.
- Choose and prepare foods with little or no salt. Aim to eat less than 2,300 mg of sodium per day (or less than 1,500 mg if you are in a higher risk group for high blood pressure).
- If you drink alcohol, drink in moderation. That means no more than one drink per day if you're a woman and two drinks per day if you're a man.
- Follow the American Heart Association recommendations when you eat out, and keep an eye on your portion sizes.
- Physical activity in your daily life is an important step to preventing heart disease. You can take a few simple steps at home, at work, and at play to increase the amount of physical activity in your life.



## QUICK REFERENCE GUIDELINE FOR 911/EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

As a reminder, the purpose of the American Red Cross First Aid/CPR/AED training program for the lay responder is to provide education and skills necessary to help sustain life and minimize the consequences of injury or sudden illness until advanced medical help arrives. By **RECOGNIZING** an emergency and **TAKING IMMEDIATE ACTION STEPS TO HELP**, you give a suddenly ill or injured person the best chance for survival. **REMEMBER**: Emergencies can often be recognized because of unusual sights, appearances, behaviors, odors or noises.

**Unusual sights** like blood, smoke, fire, people milling around, broken items; **Unusual Behaviors or Appearances** like a person who is noticeably uncomfortable, a person who is clutching their chest or throat, a person who is unconscious, a person who appears to be confused, drowsy for unknown reasons, a person who has trouble breathing, a person who has a sudden change in behavior; **Unusual Odors** like a person's breath, gasoline, natural gas, smoke, or an unrecognizable smell; **Unusual noises** like screaming, an expression, items falling, glass breaking, tires screeching, or metal crashing.

**REMEMBER THE THREE EMERGENCY ACTION STEPS:** Check scene/Check person; Call 911 or the local emergency number and provide Care!

**If there is any doubt that a medical emergency exists your role is to CALL 911 immediately!**

Signals of injuries/illnesses that would be considered potentially "life threatening":

|   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Unconsciousness                                 | Heart Attack (suspected)            |
| External Bleeding                               | Uncontrollable bleeding             |
| Persistent Chest Pain                           | Choking                             |
| Shock   | Diabetic Emergency                  |
| Severe Bleeding                                 | Severe Burns                        |
| No Breathing or Difficulty Breathing            | Stroke (suspected); weakness on     |
| one side  |                                     |
| Difficulty with speech                          | Fall with a suspected injury        |
| Fainting episodes                               | Seizures (that reoccur or last more |
| than 5 min.)                                    |                                     |
| Poisoning                                       | Severe or worsening reaction to a   |
| sting/bite                                      |                                     |
| Persistent nausea/vomiting                      |                                     |
| Trauma to head, neck, chest, abdomen or pelvis  |                                     |
| No Signs of Life (normal breathing or movement) |                                     |

**Remember you are the first link to a person's best chance of survival.....don't delay.....Call 911!!!**

744 N. 19th Street  
Allentown, PA 18104



## IDEAS FOR OUR NEWSLETTER?

Contact:

Heather Coleman, M.A., Director  
Eastern PA Health Care Quality Unit  
Toll-free at 1-877-315-6855 or  
[hs@theadvocacyalliance.org](mailto:hs@theadvocacyalliance.org).