

Everything You Need to Know About Beating the Holiday Blues and Post-Holiday Let Down



By Steve Wilson

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Emotionally Loaded Months

You probably can guess why October, November and December are called the "emotionally loaded" quarter of the year. The post-holiday period has emotional perils, too, but probably not what you think they are. What can you do to have an easier time of it all?

To do a really good job of managing holiday stresses, you will need some sense of control, some sense of predictability, some optimism, and some solid practical strategies. The information in this article will help you be smarter about holiday stress, so you can beat it before it beats you!

You may not be able to control everything that's about to happen, but if you are willing to take responsibility, you can manage your stressful reactions and you probably will have some fun along the way.

The A-B-Cs of Beating the Holiday Blues and the Post-Holiday Let-Down

A: Get a headstart

B: Plant the seeds of a better holiday season

C: Lighten up!

Here We Go Again

Heading toward the end of the year at the supermarket where we do our grocery shopping, it seems the Halloween candy shows up on display just after Labor Day, and the Christmas decorations are on sale before Columbus Day.

At this rate, it won't be long before Valentine's candy will be on sale around Thanksgiving, and the Easter bunny will arrive on New Years' Day!

Is it just me, or do you also get a disturbing feeling about being rushed into a celebratory mood?

But wait! There is a flip side to the commercial rush to the holidays. We know ahead of time that the holidays are coming. That makes them more or less predictable. Or, at least, some really important things that happen around the holidays are predictable: the office party, your Aunt Fannie's fruit cake, pressures to buy gifts and be happy, the family dinner, complete with the family squabbles, a long drive?whatever. Because you have advance warning, you can be prepared.

The better you are at predicting what is likely to happen, the better you can be at preparing for it.

More than any other time, the string of holidays and seasonal changes brings a boat-load of mixed emotions such as nostalgia, sentimentality, melodrama, bittersweet celebrations, poignancy, anger, jealousy, sadness, loss, and homesickness. And there is the added pressure of decisions such as what presents to buy, for whom, how much can you afford to spend, and who to visit when. No wonder we call these three months *emotionally loaded*? in other words, this is a very unbalanced time for many of us, and it is often followed by an emotional slump.

Every holiday can bring on emotional highs and lows, but when the holidays bunch up as they do at the end of the year, it provokes the worst extremes for many people.

Having a good understanding of how your emotions interact with your brain & body's chemistry will help you to use the smartest strategies to set the balance right.

That thought alone ought to be cause for some optimism providing you actually read this and then take action--do something about getting yourself ready. Starting right now.

Mental & Emotional Fitness for the Holidays: Re-wiring Your Brain

We become, have and attract what we think about and act upon correctly the most. -John Assaraf

Begin right now to re-wire your brain for a more positive outcome. Start as early as you can. Plant as many seeds as you can. Nurture your garden of mental & emotional fitness. The best time to plant seeds of success is when the sun is shining, not in the middle of a blizzard. Start when things are relatively calm, before the storm hits.

Start as soon as you can with these four goal-setting affirmations. Repeat them often during the day. Take a deep breath with each one and imagine yourself fulfilling them.

?This year I will actively be better prepared to manage my holiday emotions.?

?This year my holidays can be calmer than last year.?

?This year I will gladly keep myself in better balance.?

?This year I'm keeping humor in the holidays.?

Research shows that choosing any of the following activities and doing them for 21 days can re-wire your brain for well-being:

- Write down three new things you are grateful for each day;
- Write for 2 minutes a day describing one positive experience you had over the past 24 hours;
- Exercise for 10 minutes a day;
- Meditate for 2 minutes, focusing on your breath going in and out;
- Write one, quick email first thing in the morning sincerely thanking or praising a friend, colleague, or family member.

The Holiday Blues: Causes, Sources, Signals & Myths

Inevitably, the wrappings will come off family feelings. "Family holidays always ignite nostalgia about experiences in our family of origin. And just as reliably, they stir up all manner of *leftover family business*?bruised feelings and strained relations abound," according to a report in *Psychology Today* magazine.

Family ties may be tightest at these times, but so are family tensions. Holidays activate everyone's longings for visibility, for recognition, for admiration, for love. At the same time, they stir old fears--of not being nurtured, of being humiliated in the eyes of others, especially brothers and sisters, of not being appreciated. The piling up of emotional vulnerability provides a critical mass for reaction.

Awareness and acknowledgement of the underlying factors for you will help you prepare customized strategic interventions for yourself. Do any of these sound familiar?

- Unrealistic expectations
- Perfectionism
- Unresolved grief
- Family of Origin Issues
- Disappointment about Current Circumstances
- Contrast between expectation or image of holiday joy & reality of present life
- Particular emotional triggers

Signals of Holiday Blues

- Depression
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Tension
- Agitation
- Mood swings
- Down and out
- Thoughts of harming yourself
- Avoiding social interaction
- Being angry
- Overindulging in food, sweets, alcohol, drugs
- Maxing out credit cards
- Becoming physically sick
- Excessive sleepiness
- Everyone else seems bursting with holiday spirit; you're feeling wretched and exhausted.

There is no universal solution. What works for one person may not work for someone else. That's why I have combed the literature for the best advice from experts. Go through this list and start a WWFY checklist of solutions for yourself. You will often have a gut feeling about which one will work for you. That is your informed intuition. Trust your gut.

DON'T take a guilt trip over not feeling what others say you are "supposed" to feel: happy and joyous. Feeling forced to get in the holiday spirit when you don't want to be.

DO keep your expectations reasonable and realistic. Great expectations lead to equally great disappointments.

DON'T give in to gift-giving anxiety; remember the spirit of the season.

REFRESH your focus. There will be reminders of your current economic or social situation, such as being unemployed, widowed, or separated from loved ones. The oldest and smartest advice for lifting your spirits is to help somebody else lift theirs.

GRATITUDE is the antidote for despair and self-pity.

If you feel guilt over doing well while others lack basic needs, give till it hurts. Old grudges and family feuds may resurface. Look at all sides of old hurts to see if there is any possible way (compassion, pity, maturity) you can release some of your resentment.

DO NOT GIVE IN TO feeling that time has passed you by and you have not accomplished what you wanted to do with your life. You can make a fresh start at any time. The best is yet to come is not just a cliché.

Modern Science Lets Us In On a Huge Special Secret

The mind and the body are interconnected, interrelated, and interactive. Typically, the mind and body work automatically to keep you balanced and healthy. But, the system can get out of balance, which is hazardous to our health and well-being.

When the system is out of balance too intensely or for too long, we experience chronic stress and burnout. Burnout can take many forms including depression, anger, and loss of interest, addictions, and illnesses. The good news is that we have the power to influence the system, to take it off of "automatic pilot" and intervene on behalf of our own health.

The secret to preventing burnout is B-A-L-A-N-C-E. At the holidays or anytime, when work pressures build up or relationships go bad, we need to balance the obvious things like work and rest, nutrition, excitement and quiet, time with other people and time alone. And, always, at least moderate exercise will be a huge contribution to maintaining your energy and optimism.

When I use the word stress, in general I am referring to the body's magnificent system for dealing with danger or any condition we perceive as a threat. Fight or flight or flee or flow.

Stress is not caused by events; it is caused by our perception of events. It's not what happens to us, but how we look at what happens to us that determines the amount of stress we will have.

Here's a story that illustrates what I'm talking about. A man walks into a darkened garage and sees a snake. Having a dreadful fear of snakes based on an unfortunate incident when he was a boy on a family camping trip, he faints and falls onto some empty boxes causing quite a clatter. People in the house hear the commotion and go to see what happened. They turn on the garage light and there they see the man passed out in the pile of boxes. Lying next to him is a coil of rope.

There was no snake. In the shadowy light the man thought that he saw a snake, when it was really only a coil of rope. His memories of snake encounters, or stories he had heard, aroused great fear, which activated the sympathetic part of his autonomic nervous system. Instantly, his brain and other organs began to pour out various chemicals to prepare him for danger, speeding up his heart rate, stopping digestion, tensing his muscles, changing his breathing to short gasps, moving blood from his extremities to his core, and more.

Probably, because he had spent years building up this fear, he had conditioned his body to actually over-react. All of these changes created the perfect storm for a fainting spell caused by his perception—his thought that there was a snake when, in fact, there was no snake and no danger.

Your thoughts and memories about things that happened around the holidays are translated instantly into chemical reactions in your body. The resulting physical and emotional reactions are what we call our stress levels. Stress that comes on too strong, too fast, or lasts too long, is what will make us sick physically and emotionally. We need accurate perceptions. How do you get them? Ask a friend who knows you well to help you do a reality check on your predictions and memories. Are they based in a reasonable reality or are they exaggerated by distorted memories, harboring old hurts, or your imagination running wild?

Three Keys

Three keys to managing holiday stress are *balance*, *pacing*, and *perspective*. Balance your nutritional intake in the way that works best for you and your kidney disease. Don't over-eat or over-drink. Pace yourself through your work/rest cycle (you might try to get nine hours of sleep at night at least twice a week).

Take five 2-minute breaks during the workday to do something relaxing. Take your time; don't let yourself get to the end of the year with vacation days leftover.

Balance vocation with vacation: take in a funny movie or rent a comedy video, do 20-30 minutes of outdoor walking a few times each week, be playful (with your golf, tennis, euchre, or whatever).

Watch For Delayed Reactions

It is a common misconception that a mental health counselor's business, and suicide rates, will increase dramatically during the last few months of the year. In fact, when faced with the pressures of the holidays, most of us are likely to promise ourselves not to let them get us down. You may tell yourself, "I cannot let myself fall apart now. I have to hold it together. I am going to get through the holidays for the sake of family and friends." Most people do get through, only to "crash" in January, February, and March.

Myths About Holiday Suicide Rates

Myth #1: According to an April 2009 report by Ilan Shrira in *Psychology Today*, ??suicides are highest in June. (This assumes you're in the Northern Hemisphere; in the Southern Hemisphere, suicides peak around December.) ?dark days can make us feel depressed, but they rarely drive us to suicide. Most people who attempt suicide already suffer from severe depression, regardless of the weather.?

Myth #2: Scandinavian countries -- such as Sweden and Norway -- have the highest suicide rates. This isn't true. In reality, suicide is highest in Eastern European countries like Russia, Belarus, and Lithuania.

Myth #3: Suicide increases around the Christmas holidays. Sure, we can all think of times when we felt blue around the holidays, but again, this is very unlikely to trigger suicide. Quite the contrary: suicide actually decreases around Christmas and other major holidays, when most people are reconnecting with family and friends.

Pent-up feelings can worsen after the New Year when the dismal gray and cold of winter drags on and on. The post-prandial let-down can be awful. Here, again, some planning on your part will keep the lows from being too low.

Here are a few tips to make your re-entry to work or getting back to ?normal? life, getting the holidays behind you and looking forward: Organize your desk and e-mail. Reducing clutter could help reduce frustration. Think about what you can look forward to. Review your goal list. Visualize the accomplishments you want to achieve. Reminisce about the holidays; ?*Years from now we'll laugh about this*

.? With the perspective that time can bring, what was irritating at first may look humorous later. Make a scrapbook or photo album of memories you want to savor in the future. Look forward to something new; there should be a positive activity on your calendar at least every six weeks. Circle it in red and make it sacred time.

Research in the relatively new field of positive psychology demonstrates that gratitude, focusing on positive experiences, exercise, meditating, and random acts of kindness are all ways to change the pattern through which your brain views work. Here are some of the activities the researchers found effective for improving workplace well-being in a 21-day program. The positive effects were significant and lasted at least four months.

- Write down three new things you are grateful for each day;
- Write for 2 minutes a day describing one positive experience you had over the past 24 hours;
- Exercise for 10 minutes a day;
- Meditate for 2 minutes, focusing on your breath going in and out;
- Write one, quick email first thing in the morning thanking or praising a member on your team.

W.W.F.Y Strategies for Balance

Each of the suggestions below can be activated on a scale from less to more. Some are opposite of each other. Some suggestions were worth repeating, so we did. The guiding principle as to which idea, and to what degree, is best for you is ?WWFY?: What Works For You. Only you will know. Keep trying.

Modern science gives us good evidence that positive activity interventions can be very effective at correcting the perception and actions that cause the amount of stress that can make us sick. Positive activities, including everything from a jog in the park to a hot bath to quiet time, gratitude practices, visual imagery, and meditation, may be more effective to achieving balance than some medications.

Become a possibility thinker for yourself. Here is a list of positive activities that may include some excellent personal possibilities, things you can do to reduce the likelihood of becoming an emotional casualty of the holidays. The phrase ?you can do? is very important because it means you have some degree of control over whether or not the holiday blues get you so far down that you can't get up, or just push on you a bit but you can push right back.

Keep in mind that we are all different genetically and in life experiences, beliefs, values and attitudes. Therefore, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all formula.

You must experiment, observe your own reactions, and discover which works best for you, whether it is the amount of sleep you require or a method of meditation that will work best to calm your mind. Your formula may be quite different from mine, but each of us has to honor our uniqueness and create what works best for ourselves.

Finding your personal formula is empowering, restoring that all-important sense of control that you need to defeat the ill-effects of stress and pressure.

Keep observing yourself. Take note of what feels best. Then you'll be ready to put one or more idea into action early and often, which will get you ahead of the stress reactions that are

so debilitating. And, you are far less likely to succumb to holiday blues.

From this extensive list make your own shorter list of positive activities that you will try. Try them early and often. Post your list of the best ones for you on your refrigerator, the bulletin board at work, and on the bathroom mirror where you will see it first thing every day.

1. Rethink your expectations. Keep them modest, both good and bad.
2. Rethink your priorities. Get a better handle on what's really important.
3. Join a laughter circle or laughter club.
4. Exercise.
5. Lean on your support system. Tell people how you feel. Do not isolate yourself.
6. Donate to a charity.
7. Be gentle with yourself.
8. Volunteer. Giving your time will help you and them more than giving money.
9. Keep socialization to a comfortable minimum. Don't overbook. Don't stay longer than you want. When you go to a party, take an ally and have an escape plan.
10. Express gratitude. Use your cell phone to call or text messages saying Thank You to those who have done you a kindness. Set a quota of one call per day.
11. Shop differently this year, for example, shop online, early, dollar stores, etc.
12. Forget about the perfect gift.
13. Learn the Serenity Prayer, the most powerful single thought for peace of mind. Say it over and over and over. Let it really soak into to your thinking.
14. Help others.
15. Ask for help--be specific.
16. Make new family traditions. Create some that are more meaningful to you personally than the old ones that you may not actually enjoy.
17. Give yourself and everyone else permission to feel less than perfect.
18. Try a sun lamp. It could improve your mood.
19. Find positive ways to celebrate the memory of friends and loved ones.
20. Talk openly to a trusted friend or family member.
21. Look for humor.
22. Get some exercise everyday. Even a five minute walk will do you good.
23. Avoid excessive use of drugs or alcohol.
24. Do something you're good at.
25. Function within your routine.
26. Do something nice for yourself.
27. Look at your unhappy feelings logically.
28. If you take medication, don't miss doses.
29. Stay away from depressed or emotionally upset people.
30. Give yourself some quiet time.
31. If you see a therapist, schedule extra sessions.
32. Maintain contact with your counselor or support group.
33. Keep your holiday expectations realistic. Expect the intensity of holiday togetherness to breed some irritability, and take it in stride.
34. Give added attention to the things you enjoy.
35. Don't take on more responsibility than you can comfortably handle.
36. Skip the commercialized pressures. Don't go into debt for gift-giving. Give what represents the real spirit of the season: your time, attention, and caring.
37. Negotiate to get a reasonable amount of whatever you need (time, attention, support). At the same time, be flexible about the way things are done. Build some change into

family rituals.

38. Engage in prayer or meditation that suits you. Try it both alone and in community.

This year, don't sing the holiday blues. Keep your balance and your good sense of humor. Be flexible, and don't expect perfection. Make it a point to predict what is likely to happen. Empower yourself to create a personal set of WWFY "corrective" strategies. Maintain your optimism. Remember the spirit of the season without getting caught up in the commercialism, and you will find yourself whistling a happy tune.

Award-winning psychologist, Steve Wilson, also known as The Joyologist and The Cheerman of the Bored, has spent 30 years specializing in applied and therapeutic humor with a humanitarian mission. As Director of National Humor Month, he intertwines science and ancient wisdom with substance and humor to lead the world to health, happiness and peace through laughter. More than six thousand people have completed his unique training in how to create therapeutic laughter, and tens of thousands more around the world have been uplifted by his talks, classes, books, and articles. He established the World Laughter Tour, Inc., in 1998, to be a rich resource and inspiration for improving productivity, health, and well being in business, healthcare and education. For more information <http://www.worldlaughtertour.com> and <http://www.humormonth.com>.

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