



Making our holidays *really* happy

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The media constantly tells us that the holiday season should be a period of unbroken happiness where we share unbounded joy with family, friends and colleagues.

In the United States, "Happy Holidays" is probably the most often uttered salutation during the month of December -- perhaps even eclipsing "Have A Nice Day" -- but the reality of the holiday season for many is decidedly less than happy.

According to the National Institute of Health, many people are unhappy during the holidays. Instead of joy, they experience anxiousness, loneliness, feelings of stress, sadness -- and a substantial number experience full-blown depression.

For many people, at least part of the unhappiness surrounding the holidays flows from a disconnect between the circumstances that they find themselves in and the images of "perfect" holidays portrayed by advertisers and the media -- what if I don't have a significant-other; or I'm separated from my significant-other; or my family is fractured; or I've just lost my job?

For people in less than ideal circumstances -- and that describes virtually everybody -- it's just darn hard to live up to the Norman Rockwell version of what the holidays are supposed to look like!

Feeling the Holiday Blues? There are telltale signs...

Do you dread upcoming holidays events or feel overwhelmed by the shopping and entertaining "obligations"? Do you feel annoyed or uncomfortable when you hear Christmas carols or see holiday decorations? Do you feel anxious about finding "perfect" gifts? Do you feel burned-out by party pictures posted on social media?



If you answered yes to pretty much any of those questions, you are likely experiencing Holiday Blues -- and you're far from alone. Most mental health professionals report a significant increase in clients complaining about depression during the holidays -- and that certainly has been the case with our NLP Life Coaching practice.

Surveys have shown that a very large percentage of North Americans -- according to some, nearly 50% -- actually dread the holiday season.

The causes of unhappiness at the holidays are different for all of us, but four seem to affect broad groups of people...

- **The commercialization of Christmas** -- This one ranks very highly with our clients. Apparently marketers have over-shot the mark for many people, and the inability to escape Christmas decorations, Christmas music and Christmas sales pitches is a real problem for many.
- **Anxiousness over the cost of expected gift-giving** -- Closely related to generalized issues with the commercialization of Christmas, many people feel that they are obliged to purchase gifts that they really can't afford -- and they get frustrated by it!
- **The "Perfect Holiday" Syndrome** -- Many of our clients feel pressure to have (or pretend to have) a perfect holiday season where everyone gets along; all the food is fantastic; and only love and joy are expressed between family, friends and co-workers. Simply stated: these are nice aspirations, but unlikely to be fulfilled.
- **End-of-the-year introspection** -- The holidays mark the end of the year and, for many, a trigger for melancholy reflection. While introspection can certainly be a good thing, holiday introspection often takes on a darker tone, with an emphasis on loss and loneliness.



Some suggestions as to how to beat the Holiday Blues

Just do your best to ignore the commercialization of Christmas -- There is nothing that an individual can do to change the overall cultural drift toward it -- Walmart isn't going to close on Thanksgiving just because you think it's wrong to be open on Thanksgiving.

What each of us can do is to make the holidays what we want them to be for ourselves, family and friends. Going caroling is a lot more in the Christmas Spirit than going to the mall, and ad agencies can't *make* you go to the mall!

Set limits on the money spent on gifts -- The amount you love and respect someone is not measured by the amount of money you spend on their holiday gift! Remember that something thoughtful and handmade expresses a lot more love than a thoughtlessly selected high-ticket gift!

Don't buy into the Perfect Holiday Paradigm -- Your holiday is going to be exactly what it is and, being a human experience affected by other humans, probably less than "perfect". Just because it's Christmas doesn't necessarily mean that Aunt Sally is going to get along any better with Aunt Emma than she has for the past 47 years -- be glad if they don't actually come to blows at your party!

Let go of preconceptions about holiday events -- Whether it is a social gathering you are hosting or one you are attending as a guest, go with the flow! Holiday gatherings are a perfect place to savor each moment and be as present as possible.

Limit the number of holiday events you attend -- It's perfectly fine going to lots of holiday parties -- so long as going to them doesn't become a source of stress and unhappiness! Only you and your spouse or family can decide how many is too many, but if you start feeling stressed about upcoming events it's a sure sign that you've exceeded your limit.



Try outward-directed thinking to counter excessive introspection -- No single type of mental activity is more helpful beating the blues than re-focusing our thoughts away from whatever our perceived problems are and gazing outward at the beautiful world we live in.

Moving outside yourself isn't really hard at all, and can actually become quite addictive.

You can volunteer time at a homeless shelter or to worthwhile charities and causes -- and you will be richly spiritually rewarded for it -- and consider giving money to organizations that help the less fortunate, rather than to Samsung for that new smart phone.

And always: strive to experience and express gratitude for the people and things that you have in your life, rather than mentally cataloging what you don't have.

Eat well and take care of yourself -- The holidays -- whether happy or less so -- are inherently disruptive. Different schedules, parties, often more alcohol than usual, and lots of high calorie foods are all part of the holiday mix.

It is important to pace yourself and stick with healthy eating habits you've established -- ok, maybe not at the parties, but on other days...

Be kind to yourself -- Try doing something special for yourself that is as considerate, loving and generous as you do for others.

Remember the good things about the traditional holiday season and its spirit -- The holidays are a special time that provides tremendous opportunities for us to express loving kindness, generosity of spirit, and gratitude for the people we know and love -- and generous and loving greetings to those we meet.



Take advantage of those opportunities now -- you'll be happy you did -- and they're great tools for beating the post-holiday blues...but that's a different article!

Happy Holidays to all, and have a very Happy New Year!

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