

## The Ghosts of Christmas and the Holiday Blues By Dr. Russ Wood

So the season is here. Lots of joy, cheer and good things to be sure, but many folks will wrestle with stress and sadness throughout and after the holiday season. While the ghosts of Christmas in Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" ultimately demonstrated to Scrooge the error of his ways and resulted in his awakening to be a better and happier person, different types of Christmas ghosts haunt many people in the modern world. These issues were first brought to the public eye when Dr. J.P. Cattell wrote of the Holiday Syndrome in 1955. He described it as a disorder with feelings of anxiety, irritability, helplessness, depressed mood and "a wish for magical resolution of problems."

For some this Holiday Syndrome appears tied to Christmas past. It may have to do with lost loved ones or just a longing for simpler times. For others this may be tied to remembering a childhood where basic needs for love and affection were not met or memories of Christmas that are tied to unforgettable experiences of trauma or abuse. Christmas present poses its own set of issues: How do I afford the gifts that my child wants? How do I get the lights up, cook the food, send cards, fight the traffic, and do all the things that are expected of me at this time of year? How do I make the holiday perfect? How do I do the shopping and keep my sanity? Even the things we may consider positive can be stressful, such as attending multiple social or church gatherings and eating a lot of delicious food. Then there is the future: What happens when the bills come due? What if there are health problems? How am I going to lose this weight? Was this the last holiday that I will get to spend with my loved one?

For many reasons, this season and the months that follow can spur us to reflect on important aspects of our lives. Sometimes this reflection can assist us in more fully appreciating our lives and the lives of others and can allow us to grow in new directions. But other times, this amount of reflection can also be overwhelming when there are so many expectations, events, memories and concerns. Below are a few thoughts and tips for having a happier and more joyful holiday season:

1. Awareness and Acceptance – Be aware of your thoughts and feelings and accept them. Sometimes it is difficult to understand why we feel what we feel, but if we look closely, with an open mind and sometimes with the help of others, we can usually figure out why we feel what we feel. When we do so, we are often able to work through those feelings or move forward from the things that may keep us stuck. It's also important to recognize that there is no wrong or right to how you feel. Right and wrong have to do with what you do or how you act on your thoughts and feelings. In this regard, it's important to remember that outside of emergencies and sports, there is no need to react to thoughts and feelings, emotionally or behaviorally. Just recognize and accept them and after understanding your thoughts and feelings, you may decide to express or act on them in any number of ways. Sometimes people try to stuff their feelings or pretend that they don't exist; this often happens when one doesn't feel safe with or feels guilty about their feelings. This tactic never seems to work out well as

the feelings usually find a way to express themselves anyway, and often in hurtful ways or in places where they don't belong. The person who has an angry outburst with a family member when they are actually angry about the way they were treated at work is a prime example of stuffed feelings coming out in the wrong place.

2. Nonjudgmentalness – OK... this is not really a word that exists in most dictionaries, however it seems the best term for talking about this issue. Being regularly judgmental with oneself or others is generally not helpful for anyone. Often people engage in beating themselves up mentally for whatever they believe it is about themselves that is not as good as it *should* be. When you look a bit more closely at this message of inadequacy that some people tend to repeatedly deliver to themselves or others, it is usually tied to messages that were received early in life, often from people who were important to them. Without realizing the source, people may play these negative messages to themselves or others with resulting stress and negative feelings. This is not to say that clear self-examination and a desire for self-improvement are not worthwhile – they certainly are, but it is important to recognize the difference between these and the emotional beating of self or others that come from old messages that have been stowed away in the back of one's mind.
3. Emotions Change – Similar to the “it's what you do” insurance company ads, “if you are an emotion, you change - it's what you do.” Remembering this can be reassuring in the moment you are feeling overwhelmed by a difficult emotion such as anxiety, sadness, anger or grief. If you are patient...the emotion will change and you will feel different.
4. Say No – If you are a person who tends to like to please others, you likely have difficulty saying no. This can result in tremendous stress during the holidays when there are a multitude of events and projects that you may be asked to help with either physically or financially. While engaging in these activities can be rewarding for yourself and others, it's important to remember that you can't do them all. It is OK to say “no.”
5. Look for and appreciate The Small Things – When we get stressed, depressed or otherwise overly occupied, it is easy to forget the small things that feel good to us or make us smile inside. Whether it's the feeling of stepping out of a cold wind into a car that's been slightly warmed by the sun, the smell of bread baking in the grocery, or a smile on a stranger's face; little things are worth appreciating. The small things that carry meaning vary tremendously from person to person. So, actively look for and find those things that bring even small amounts of joy to your heart.
6. Exercise – Even 20 minutes a day of exercise a few times a week can help with feelings of anxiety and depression. Do what you are able and don't over-do it.

Ask your doctor if you have doubts about your physical capacity for exercise.

7. Habits – Have you ever seen a horse that is taken on the same trail every day? It goes around and around the trail and returns to the stable for food and water? Have you ever tried to get that horse to leave the trail? It's probably not going to leave that trail easily. It has a habit and in order to get it to take a new direction you will probably have to get off the horse and pull it by the reins in the direction you want it to go. Changing our thinking habits is a similar proposition. It is almost certainly easier to continue the way we do things, even if it makes the holidays or life harder. Whether you are trying to accept your feelings, be non-reactive, be non-judgmental with yourself or others, remember that feelings change or trying to make yourself get more exercise, it will likely be a challenge if these are not already your habits. You may have to work hard to drag your way of thinking onto a new trail.
8. Getting Help – Professional help is available. If you feel overwhelmed and stuck or are having problems that interfere with your home or work life, there are numerous professionals available in our community to help you address your specific needs. Your doctor or a service such as the American Psychological Association, Psychologist Locator (<http://locator.apa.org/>) may assist you with finding a professional that will work best for you.

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