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AVOID THE HOLIDAY BLUES WITH THESE TIPS FOR A HAPPIER HOLIDAY SEASON

LOS ANGELES (Nov. 29, 2007) -- With holiday celebrations to attend and family gatherings to prepare for, December can be a busy, joyful time. But for many, heightened expectations and the stresses of holiday events can increase anxiety and cause depression.

"Depression is a common illness in adults, but seasonal blues is a different condition that can be experienced by many people who aren't 'clinically depressed' " said Mark H. Rapaport, M.D., chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

According to Rapaport, unrealistic expectations of family gatherings and holiday parties often lead to disappointment and depression around the holidays. Financial stress, overbooked schedules and memories of "perfect" holidays past or lost loved ones can also all contribute to feelings of tension, anxiety and sadness.

"In terms of relationships, nothing magical 'just happens' during the holidays," said Rapaport. "If you don't get along with your in-laws during the year, you're probably not going to get along with them during the holiday season, either. Understanding that before you go to visit them can improve how you'll handle your feelings while you're there. "

Since holiday schedules are hectic and often include unstructured time, planning ahead for how to handle difficult situations can also help people cope with holiday-related stress and anxiety.

"If you plan ahead and focus on what you really enjoy about the season, you can spend more time 'living in the moment,' which is the key to getting the most out of each holiday experience," he said.

Rapaport offers several suggestions for coping and enjoying the holiday season more fully:

- Have realistic expectations of interactions you'll be having with family and friends. Chances are that people will have not changed much from last year.
- Make a list and prioritize the activities that are important to you. Make time for those; and consider carefully whether you absolutely must do everything on that list.
- Don't lose sight of the meaningful moments of the season. Look for them, and be optimistic that you'll find them.
- Limit your drinking. Drinking too much can lead to bad behavior, hangovers, and remorse, all of which can lead to depression.

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- Let others share responsibilities of the season. No one person should feel burdened by all of the shopping, party planning, cooking and holiday activities.
- Make an active effort not to worry so much about the details. Live in the moment as much as possible.
- Be sure to get regular exercise. Walking for 30 minutes three times a week can make a difference in how you feel.
- Keep track of your holiday spending. Gifts that you can't afford won't make you happy – and the cost of the gift probably won't matter to the receiver. Consider the more important aspect of giving -- making the recipient feel good in knowing that you cared.
- Try to eat well and get enough rest. Hard to do, but the benefits of both are obvious.
- Spend time with supportive and caring people; reach out to others who may benefit from your support.
- Make time for yourself. Everyone needs downtime.
- Remember that there is no ideal or model for a perfect holiday. With second marriages and so many different types of families, feel free to create your own unique way to celebrate.

The holidays are also a time when people feel the loss of a loved one more sharply. Dr. Rapaport suggests planning something meaningful during the holidays in that person's memory, such as donating a gift to the needy or volunteering.

"The season offers many opportunities for joy and celebration," said Rapaport. "The challenge is to acknowledge and address the potentially negative aspects of the season beforehand. By being flexible, dealing with the 'here and now,' having a sense of humor and trying to be compassionate and forgiving as often as you can, it is possible to have a happy – and rewarding – holiday season."

Psychiatrists and therapists at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center's Adult Outpatient Psychiatric Service treat adults with mental health issues including depression, eating disorders, addiction and anxiety. For more information, call 1-310-423-4715.

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