

Mind, Body and Soul

'Tis the Season to be Jolly?... Stressed?... a Little Bit of Both?

Dr. Jeannie offers tips on coping

Dr. Jeannie Aschkenasy, Clinical Psychologist

The beginning of November heralds the holiday season: Thanksgiving followed by Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanza, other celebrations, and the New Year.

In Chicago, November 15 is the deadline for all boats to be removed from Lake Michigan, and the unofficial end to our fall season. Days become shorter; Daylight Savings Time ends November 2. Sunlight becomes scarce and the dreaded Chicago winter is almost upon us.

People's moods truly can be affected by the weather, formally named seasonal affective disorder.

In years past, stores closed on the holidays, everybody had time off, and families and friends lived near each other. Now you have to decide where to spend the holidays - and with whom.

You may have limited funds and time to travel. You may be single, married, divorced or have blended families, sharing old traditions or creating new ones. As a therapist, I often hear of individuals struggling to cope with the holidays, for a vari-

ety of reasons.

If you ARE looking forward to the holidays, be grateful. However, you can still experience additional stress, as there are increased demands on your time and resources.

And if you ARE NOT looking forward to the holidays, and you are concerned that you will be and/or feel alone, then perhaps you might look into volunteering - serve a meal to someone else (homeless shelter or soup kitchen), or engage in random acts of kindness.

Try to anticipate what you will do for the holidays, and make a plan.

Here are some helpful tips:

1. Set a dollar amount you have to spend, and supplement with "coupons of action" (give a massage, cook a meal, babysit etc.)
2. Give a present to yourself -- something you will enjoy.
3. Do not overcommit - too much of a good thing can be too much.
4. Try to get enough sleep, eat well, and engage in physical activity.
5. When with family, it is still okay to take

some "alone time" - go for a walk, run, read, etc.

6. Talk with friends - make a plan with them, or see if you might join them in their plans.

7. Foster a pet.

8. Make a list of what you are grateful for.

9. Keep expectations realistic - about the holidays, your family, your friends, and yourself.

10. If you are divorced or have blended families, keep your children out of the middle.

11. If someone close to you has died in the past year, expect this holiday to be different and possibly, difficult.

12. Finally, If you find that you cannot even begin to look or plan ahead, or feel very depressed, anxious, hopeless, have difficulty sleeping or there is a significant change in your appetite, you may benefit from talking with a counselor. Contact your internist or primary care physician for a mental health referral, or go to the nearest Emergency Room.

Jeannie Aschkenasy, Ph.D. ("Dr. Jeannie") is a licensed clinical psychologist, who has more than 25 years of experience in private practice and at Rush University Medical Center working with children, adolescents, adults and families. Dr. Jeannie graduated from Smith College and earned her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. Her post-doctoral training was at the Piaget Institute in Geneva Switzerland, Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago and the University of Chicago. Dr. Jeannie is also on staff at John H. Stroger, Jr. Hospital of Cook County.

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