

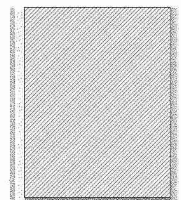
IT'S THE HOLIDAYS: SO WHY AREN'T YOU HAPPY?

Joyful times can make you, well, miserable. But finding your way out of the blues may be easier than you expect. Here's how.

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THE GUIDE
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IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME of the year. Don't you feel great? Uh...no? What's wrong with you? Probably nothing. Scientific research confirms what you may already know: Many "happy" occasions are precisely when you're most likely to feel anxious, overwhelmed, and sad. While it's true that plenty of people are frazzled during the holidays, women are unduly affected, with 44 percent reporting that they're more stressed and irritated than usual, compared with just 31 percent of men, according to the consulting firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. And although you might expect to have mixed feelings about birthdays and major life events, such as retirement, many people are still unpleasantly surprised when angst far outweighs exhilaration, say the experts.

"Most festive or commemorative periods involve change. And all change, even the positive kind, potentially causes stress," says Simon Rego, Psy.D., the director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center, in New York City. "When you're stressed, the four activities that create a balanced life—sleeping, eating well, exercising, and spending time with people you care about—are usually the first to drop off your priority list."

What's more, "we tend to have high expectations for certain life events and set ideas about how we're supposed to feel in particular situations," says Tim Bono, Ph.D., a lecturer in psychological and brain sciences at Washington University, in St. Louis. But the very act of telling yourself, "I should be happy" or "I shouldn't be blue," intensifies negative feelings. "It's called cognitive rebounding," says Bono. "If I tell you not to think of a white bear, what animal do you immediately think of?



Attempting to ignore or repress your emotions works the same way."

To move past melancholy, "Give yourself permission to feel whatever you're feeling," says Bono. "It's actually powerful to say to yourself, 'This isn't pleasant, but it's part of life.'" Once you've done that, other minor shifts in the way you think and act can help you restore a sanguine state of mind. Here are three key times in life when you may feel anything but celebratory, and expert solutions to help you bounce back.

CELEBRATORY SLUMP No.1 HOLIDAYS, BIRTHDAYS, AND ANNIVERSARIES

Being able to pick up on other people's emotions and expectations has helped our species survive for hundreds of thousands of years. Even so, "that emotional intelligence can make you feel bad—especially during times when others are expecting certain reactions and you don't react as they expect you will, or you feel you have to fake it to make them happy," says Alex Korb,

Ph.D., a neuroscientist and postdoctoral researcher at UCLA and the author of *The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time*. "And women's brains have more gray matter in the area where there are mirror neurons—that is, brain cells that react to other people's actions as well as their own. This may make women more susceptible to mimicking and absorbing the expectations and emotions of others." (Complicated family dynamics make celebrations even more difficult, of course, as do feelings of loss or grief that tend to surface during get-togethers.)

HOW TO BOUNCE BACK

Hit your internal pause button.

One way to stop ruminating about family events or festivals you're not excited by is to embrace what psychologist, author, and meditation teacher Tara Brach, Ph.D., calls "the sacred pause." Choose an activity you do daily, like washing dishes. As you're about to begin or end that activity, close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and as you exhale, try to let go of the tension in your body. Centering your attention on a single moment helps you develop an ability to enjoy the here and now, says Brach.

Write down three good things

about your day. Yes, you know that gratitude is good for you. What you may not realize is that it activates brain regions associated with dopamine, a neurotransmitter that influences pleasure, behavior, and motivation, says Korb.

Gratitude serves another practical purpose: "Happiness is usually linked to waiting for something to happen to you," says Janice Kaplan, the author *The Gratitude Diaries*. "But gratitude is based on your

attitude toward what happens, which puts you back in the driver's seat—and those feelings of control make you feel content."

Writing helps gratitude-related feelings stick. Case in point: Women who handwrote a list of what they were grateful for four times a week were happier and less stressed than were those who didn't make note of their gratitude, according to a 2015 study published in *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*.

CELEBRATORY SLUMP No. 2 AFTER A BIG ACCOMPLISHMENT

It's not that reaching a major goal can't make you happy; it can, at least momentarily. "But the intense focus and process of working toward a goal brings the most euphoria," says Doug Jowdy, Ph.D., an assistant clinical professor of psychology at the University of Colorado Hospital Denver School of Medicine. "Striving can become addictive, and if that's what makes you feel good about yourself, it's common to feel blue when the striving is over." For example, almost 80 percent of women who lose a significant amount of weight are depressed afterward (and not only because they were living on low-calorie fare), according to a 2014 study out of University College London, in England. That's because doing—not becoming—ultimately leads to feelings of self-worth, says Jowdy.

The pursuit of long-term goals also creates changes in your brain's prefrontal cortex, the area that plays a major role in how you organize your thoughts and behaviors, reflecting what's important to you. "If you've been scheduling your days around training for a marathon, say, and then your race is over, you sud-

denly no longer have that organizing system for your brain," says Korb. "This can make you feel like you're floating without aim."

HOW TO BOUNCE BACK

Ask yourself, "Who am I outside of my accomplishments?" Forget where you went to school, what you do for a living, or how you spend your spare time. Are you loyal? Funny? Intuitive? "Naming your core values boosts self-compassion," says Jowdy. "That helps you get past post-accomplishment letdown, as well as disappointment if you don't meet a goal." In fact, people who practice self-compassion are more resilient in the face of depression and anxiety, according to research conducted at the University of Texas at Austin. "I spent years working on my book, *10% Happier*, half expecting no one would read it," says Dan Harris, an ABC News



HAPPIER-HOLIDAYS TIP:

When people say things like "Don't be a Scrooge" and your blood begins to boil, remind yourself that you're feeling pressured to be happy. This will trigger brain changes that reduce the impact of guilt and sadness, research shows.

anchor in New York City. "But after it became a best seller, I felt kind of daunted and thought, Now what? I ultimately got out of that slump by realizing there was no point in trying to top what I had done before. The only smart move was to pursue projects about which I was passionate."

Pursue multiple mini-goals.

Instead of trying to follow a big accomplishment with an equally impressive one, it may be healthier to opt for several smaller goals. "The very act of trying to make the best decision (like pursuing a life-changing achievement) stresses your brain by activating its critical and judgmental circuitry," says Korb. "The more you search, the more you uncover all the reasons why that choice may not be the right one. But choosing small, good-enough goals calms the critical-judgmental circuitry, allowing you to focus your attention and promoting happier feelings."

CELEBRATORY SLUMP No. 3

A LIFE TRANSITION LIKE MARRIAGE, RETIREMENT, A NEW HOME, OR AN EMPTY NEST

Humans are incredibly good at adapting to new circumstances, but that doesn't mean we enjoy it. "Our brains are designed to predict things. When patterns in our lives change, emotions such as sadness, loss, and

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HAPPIER-HOLIDAYS TIP:
Get sentimental. Nostalgia counteracts loneliness by reminding you that you have social support, according to a 2008 study published in *Psychological Science*.

vulnerability—which are based on our brain's responses to stimuli—become heightened," notes Korb.

During times of flux, we're especially prone to feelings of guilt ("Why aren't I enjoying my retirement?") and shame ("I can't believe I married the love of my life and yet now I feel miserable"). "It sounds counterintuitive, but these emotions activate the same brain regions that light up when you win money," says Korb. "So they feel rotten but can be strangely appealing. By blaming yourself, you reinforce the belief that you have some control over the situation—and may be able to do things differently the next time."

You also may have been so busy—or so intent on wholeheartedly embracing the next phase of your life—that you didn't take the time to mark (or mourn) what you had left behind. That can lead to unexpected waves of sadness. "Sooner or later, feelings we haven't processed tend to bubble back up," says Rego.

HOW TO BOUNCE BACK

Ask yourself, Is this thought useful?

"One of my meditation teachers taught me to ask myself this when I was worrying," says Harris. "It immediately allows you to see whether your rumination serves a purpose and will trigger positive behavior, or if it's just your brain, stuck in a negative rut." Identifying your thoughts and asking if they're rational is so effective that this is used as a primary strategy

in cognitive behavioral therapy—a practice that's especially effective for decreasing depressive feelings and dealing with change.

Create a ritual. Rituals satisfy humans' innate hankering for routine—and increase your ability to enjoy positive experiences when you feel anything but positive. You don't even need to believe in a ritual's effectiveness to reap its benefits. For example, students who were told to eat a chocolate bar according to ritual-oriented instructions (break the bar in half without unwrapping it, then unwrap half the bar and eat it, then unwrap the other half and eat that, too) were more likely to savor it compared with a group of students who ate the chocolate any way they pleased, according to a 2013 study published in the journal *Psychological Science*. Have a cup of coffee in a certain mug at the same time every morning. Or make a daily ritual out of something you must do each day, like brushing your teeth. Going through a set, repeated process can make staid activities more pleasurable.

Be a little sappy. Go through old photos, or think of happy memories from the role or position you just left behind. "Reminiscing can help boost the production of the neurotransmitter serotonin," says Korb. Serotonin increases positive feelings now and prompts you to take positive actions (like booking a plane ticket to see your grandchild) that will make you happier in the future, too.



CHEER UP

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