

# Don't let depression haunt your holidays

By Heather Flynn

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Although the holiday season is often associated with concepts such as “cheer” and “joy,” there is a flip side to that coin. For many people, the holidays can bring stress, anxiety and mood changes. What’s more, about one person in 10 is at risk for a serious medical illness known as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) or clinical depression.

It differs from expected, mild mood changes such as feeling sad, down or blue. With MDD, several symptoms occur for *most* of the day, nearly *every* day, for *at least* two weeks, and they significantly interfere with day-to-day functioning. Such symptoms include:

- Depressed or irritable mood.
- Loss of interest in usual activities.
- Significant changes in appetite, weight or sleep.
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt.
- Problems with decision-making or concentration.
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

For women, the risks of depression are about twice as high as for men. The reasons have eluded scientists, but it is clear that understanding sex differences may be key to understanding causes of depression in general and to designing more effective treatments.

Depression that occurs during pregnancy or postpartum can occur in up to 20 percent of women and may harm the health of the mother, baby or both. Researchers at the Florida State University College of Medicine are in the early stages of research that aims to better identify and treat depression and related medical problems around the time of pregnancy, and to understand and prevent problems for the mother and baby down the road.

Aside from childbearing, any time of stress or change in routine – such as the holidays – may become high-risk for people who are prone to MDD or other problems such as anxiety disorders. The reasons for increased holiday risk are not entirely known, but they have been associated with shorter periods of daylight exposure and an array of changes in areas such as sleep, diet, exercise and, for some, excessive alcohol consumption.

These are tips for managing mood and anxiety changes during the holiday period:

- Try to keep a regular sleep schedule (alcohol intake disrupts restful sleep) and maintain as much of your daily routine as possible.
- Get regular exercise. It has been shown to help treat depression and boost your mood.
- Try to prepare your coping skills before interacting with family and friends. (Deep breathing can help a lot.)
- Prioritize self-care over everything else.
- Keep your expectations realistic.

- If you're being treated for depression or anxiety, work with your clinician to ensure that your treatment is maintained properly over the holiday period.

Currently, the most effective and available treatments include antidepressant medications and forms of counseling or psychotherapy that specifically target the symptoms of depression. If you have a history of MDD or a strong family history, and if you notice the symptoms listed above, a good first step is to talk to your doctor – who may make a referral or initiate treatment. For women, the safety instruction given on airplanes (“Put on your oxygen mask before helping others”) is a helpful way to think about putting your own self-care first and taking charge of relaxing and enjoying the holidays.

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View video on clinical depression: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izjWGCzZu3A>