

How to Beat the Holiday Blues

By Jennifer Wake

You can see it all around us: holiday decorations adorn light poles, festive knickknacks line store shelves. The holidays are upon us. The season brings families together, traditional foods to our tables, and – of course – gifts. But for many in the Lamorinda area, the season simply brings a sense of foreboding.

“If people are already tense or depressed, the holidays (with all expectations to perform, either by buying, wrapping and delivering gifts, cooking for a zillion others, or planning a visit that seems like an incredible hassle) make everything worse,” said Orinda resident and psychiatrist Dr. Harvey Widroe.

Lafayette psychologist Ellen Lev, Ph.D., explains that since the holidays are times of gatherings, rituals, and relationships, if an individual is alone, or lacks a sufficient support system, the approaching holiday triggers heightened sadness, and emptiness.

Unlike clinical depression, which the National Institute of Mental Health says affects more than 19 million people each year, depression during the holidays is usually temporary, often lifting a few days or weeks after the end of the season. But that does not mean the feelings are not real.

For Lafayette resident Marilyn Finn, the sparkle of the holiday season



Shoppers experience one of the many holiday stresses: waiting

Photo Jennifer Wake



One dad points out decorations at Sun Valley Mall as his sons wait for Santa to return

Photo Jennifer Wake

after her divorce and her journey into single parenting. During that time, she and two other single friends chose to combat the blues by setting off on a week-long trip to Puerto Vallarta right after Christmas. “That got us through it that year,” she said.

The tricky part now for Finn is surviving the holidays on her limited income. “The stress of trying to find thoughtful creative gifts is depressing,” she said. “I know that if I make my family something they can use, they’ll appreciate that I did something, instead of what I do now, which is freeze.”

Dr. Lev suggests we be realistic about the holidays. “Holiday times fuel our childhood fantasies of perfection and idealism,” she said. “Even if we didn’t live it, we see it plastered all over the advertising world. If we measure our cur-

rent experience against that, we often come up short and disappointed.”

What else can we do? The University of Maryland Medical Center suggests we create new or different ways to celebrate, enjoy activities that are free, contact someone with whom we have lost touch, treat ourselves as a special holiday guest, and find a way to do something for someone else.

Finn agrees. For several years, she and another single friend whose family lives on the East coast have delivered holiday dinners for the Salvation Army to people in San Francisco who were homebound. Each year after the deliveries, she said she would come home feeling blessed with everything she had.

The grass is not always greener on the other side, says Lev. “Practice gratitude and acceptance for what you do have,” she said. “Create a ritual for yourself that you can do by yourself that you can enjoy. Invite someone to join you. If a loved one is absent, use visualization to imagine their presence with you. Allow yourself to have your feelings! They are normal. They illuminate what is important to you. And feelings pass.”

Widroe says to remember that the holidays are a time-limited stress.

“Scaling back on what you think is expected of you isn’t the end of the world (it is usually only a passing ripple),” he said. “If you spot someone who seems down, talk to them, even those not close to you. More often than not, they will benefit from it. Did you ever say to your grocery clerk, ‘You seem down today; are you okay?’ You will be surprised at the positive response you are likely to get.”

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