

## Merry Christmas?

Have you ever felt low at Christmas? You're not alone. Amid family parties, presents, cards, phone calls and good wishes, many people feel as if they are crying or dying on the inside. Maybe you're one of them. Divorce lawyers brace themselves for a huge number of enquiries in the New Year from people who decide that they cannot cope with being married any longer – the enforced family holiday tips some married couples over the edge.

### Christmas blues

Several factors can produce Christmas blues for anyone, even a person who has an outwardly calm and stress free life:

Family trouble and bereavement can make the holiday dismal for everyone.

Hectic activity can bring physical and emotional stress. Christmas travel, shopping, cleaning, cooking, and visitors, although you do it willingly, are exhausting. Is it frustrating to realise that you can't do all the things you used to be able to so easily?

Overspending can produce financial pressure.

Year-end reflection and focus on loss can magnify sorrow.

Over eating and over drinking combined with not enough sleep is also a formula for extreme emotional swings.

Maybe the family is apart this season by necessity or choice? Maybe an "empty chair" reminds you of your pain. Does the Christmas party contrast with your deep personal loss?

One widow recalled how she felt during the Christmas after her husband's death: "*Little mattered to me. I didn't want to hear carols. I didn't want to be cheered up. I didn't want to look at Christmas cards. I wanted the same thing I'd wanted every day for eight months: the strength to force myself out of bed in the morning, to brush my teeth and to eat.*"

One possible influence, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), is a form of depression health workers don't completely understand. Genetics, age and body chemistry could be the culprits. See your doctor if you feel down for days and have motivation problems. Symptoms can include changing sleep patterns and appetite, feeling hopeless, or seeking comfort in alcohol.

### Coping

How can you cope ?

#### Some suggestions from the experts:

1. Spend time with people, especially positive ones who lift your spirits.
2. Exercise regularly. Simply getting the body moving can help clear your mind.
3. Be careful what you eat and drink. Chocaholics beware. Overindulgence can mean temporary highs followed by disappointing lows – and an expanded waistline. Alcohol will temporarily help, but is ultimately a depressant – and the after effects of too much drink are terrible!
4. Lights on! Enjoy sunlight, outdoors if possible. Brighten up your home and workplace. Light therapy can help SAD.

- 5.** Budget your spending and stick with your budget, preventing next month's credit card shock. If you know the family overspent at Christmas, can you invite everyone for a meal in January to ease the housekeeping strain?
- 6.** Talk about your feelings. Keeping them bottled up can mean anxiety, and is linked to physical illness, seeing the worst in every situation, or exploding with anger. Who wants to be with someone like that at Christmas?
- 7.** Give to others. Giving is essential for physical and mental health. If people are too much for you, there are always animals, who never judge.
- 8.** Get professional help if necessary. Many lifelong Christians, health workers, and outwardly confident people speak very movingly about how they themselves realise they need professional help navigating life's storms.
- 9.** Develop spiritual roots. It helps if before the dark days begin, you have some inner resources to call on. Some people say they survive Christmas by being able to practise their yoga, mediation, or quiet prayer time even on the busiest day. No adults get up early on Christmas Day, there is time for you to prepare for the day ahead if you know its going to be stressful!

If you are reading this paper in January – how was Christmas for you?

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