



## Coping with the Holiday Blues

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I absolutely love this time of year—the lights, the trees, the music and the excitement! Overall for me, it is a joyful time, but amidst all of the excitement and seasonal festivities I sometimes also experience an unexpected melancholy or tearfulness that intrudes on my holiday cheer. It usually starts when I begin making my grandmother’s cranberries or my mother’s stuffing recipe at Thanksgiving. The joyful memories of holidays past swirl around me, and the grief that I thought was long resolved surfaces and I find myself inexplicitly mourning those losses all over again. I know this is very normal when you have lost loved ones, and yet it catches me by surprise every year.

For some of the students I work with, it isn’t the grief or losses that plague them during the holidays but instead it is the anxieties about returning home over the break. For some, it may be worries over not meeting parental expectations after an especially difficult academic semester, while for others it may be concerns about returning to family pressures or fears about judgement by relatives. Other students do not look forward to going back home to family rules after being independent. Many worry about financial issues and may feel pressured to buy presents when they are already struggling to finance their education or even more basic needs like food and housing. I have also worked with students who cannot go home during the holidays because of expenses and distance or because the family home no longer exists due to a recent family divorce.

Whatever the reasons, the reality is that the holidays may not always be the picture perfect image that we see in the latest Hallmark Christmas movie. So how do you cope with moments or situations like those described above or those that may be unique to you and your family?

Begin by being gentle with yourself. Allow the feelings to surface and acknowledge them. Some students find it helpful to journal about them or to express their feelings creatively using art, music or poetry. Allow yourself to grieve if needed.

Savor some old traditions if that feels right and comfortable, and if not, create some new ones of your own. It may be as simple as starting a hot cocoa ritual each morning or taking a walk to look at the lights.

Connect with support systems that are safe and nonjudgmental. If these do not currently exist, then take a risk and volunteer to help at a local soup kitchen or children’s hospital or for some organization or group you are interested in. You will find that volunteering during this time will connect you with others, and you may find yourself developing some

wonderful new and supportive relationships. If volunteering doesn't feel comfortable right now, then reach out to someone you have wanted to reconnect with or get to know more.

Simplify expectations for yourself and others. Positive Psychology research demonstrates consistently that investing in experiences and relationships instead of buying more stuff is better for our overall happiness. Instead of feeling pressured to buy a parent, child, partner or friend that latest gift you can't really afford, give them the gift of your time and plan something fun together. Try not to over plan and allow yourself to be fully present in the moment.

Watch how you talk to yourself. Notice when those critical inner voices start to whisper to you about expectations, not being good enough or any of the other negative things that you may typically say to yourself. Instead, take out a notebook and focus on gratitude.

Ten things may have not gone well today but what things went right? Celebrate those things.

Finally, if it ever gets overwhelming, be aware that there is a lot of support out there for you to take advantage of:

- As a UNT student, you have access to TAO, which is a confidential self-help online program that can help with things like anxiety, depression and substance use issues. You can access TAO by visiting <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/services/therapist-assisted-online-counseling/tao-self-help-at-unt>.
- In addition, there are emergency text lines ([www.crisistextline.org](http://www.crisistextline.org)) and live chats available ([www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)).
- When you return after the break, our team at Counseling and Testing Services is also here for short-term counseling support as well as referral assistance for students who may need more long-term support. You can read more about our department by visiting <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services>. We also offer a wide array of group therapies and workshops as well. In addition, you can check out our department Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/UNTCTS/>) or the Facebook group of one of our therapy dogs Buddy (<https://www.facebook.com/BuddyTheTherapyPoodle/>).

All of us at Counseling and Testing Services wish you a peaceful Holiday Break.