



MARTHA STEWART

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holiday party



All the Feels

Emotions run extra-high this time of year, spanning the good, the bad, and the totally unexpected. (Raise your hand if you've ever welled up just hearing "Auld Lang Syne.") Here's how to ride the wave—and help friends or family through any troughs.

TEXT BY CATHY ALTER

THE HOLIDAYS BRING ON the expectation of pure happiness—all the time, and for everyone. In reality, however, many of us experience a host of powerful emotions, and some of them aren't joyful (or Instagram-worthy). If you're feeling stressed or down, rest assured you're not alone. The truth is, we're all more susceptible to worry, anger, and sadness in the winter months, notes Norman Rosenthal, M.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine who is known for his landmark research into seasonal affective disorder, aptly known as SAD. The flurry of feelings that arise can give you a mild case, he says, and leave you feeling unexcited or blah—a state Rosenthal calls "oatmeal." And when you're coping with a personal loss, job concerns, family drama, or other stressors, celebrating is a challenge. Consider these common holiday moods and how to handle them.

NORMAN ROCKWELL SYNDROME

WHAT'S HAPPENING: You're overwhelmed by the pressure to do it all (mail cards, get gifts, keep the house spotless) and be graceful about it. "Those expectations are fueled by the commercial mythology around the holidays," says Rosenthal. "All over TV and social media, you see happy families gathered around the tree and opening beautiful presents, and you think, *This isn't me.*"

KEY SYMPTOM: You constantly compare yourself with others, which makes you feel worse,

GOOD LIVING HEALTH

says Beth Cabrera, Ph.D., a senior scholar at the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Virginia. Social media can exacerbate the problem, adds Rosenthal. “Very few people post pictures that say, ‘Look how badly my turkey came out.’”

HOW TO HANDLE IT: Take a holiday from apps like Facebook and Instagram. “It’s the best gift you can give yourself,” says Rosenthal. Even a one-week Facebook break has tangible benefits, a 2016 study published in *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* found—it’ll help you feel more satisfied and positive about your own life (instead of thinking your turkey doesn’t measure up). Got a frazzled friend? Invite her out for a cell-phone-free lunch or dinner.

A GUILTY GUT FEELING

WHAT’S HAPPENING: Maybe you can’t travel to visit family this year, or you put off shopping until the last minute. Maybe all the money you’re spending has you feeling more aware, and ashamed, of your good fortune. Such sentiments may be especially intense this year, due to the recent natural disasters and mass shooting in Las Vegas, says Robert Hales, M.D., chair of the psychiatry department at the University of California, Davis.

KEY SYMPTOM: You admonish yourself with negative thoughts. “We say things in our heads that we’d never say to our worst enemies, like, ‘I’m terrible for not buying gifts for my book club,’” Cabrera says. Or, if you’re feeling too flush, you may judge others for their excessive spending (psychologists call this projection).

HOW TO HANDLE IT: Instead of dwelling on how you fall short, repeat this mantra: “Good enough is good enough.” Any time the little voice in your head calls you out, have self-compassion by recognizing that

you are human, says Cabrera. If a friend is on her own guilt trip, share your new motto with her and assure her that she’s doing great. To ease the pangs that come from having plenty, Cabrera suggests volunteering. “Visit people in a retirement home who may be lonely, or help decorate a church or school,” she says. “Any act of kindness will give you a boost.”

RED-AND-GREEN BLUES

WHAT’S HAPPENING: You’re feeling the heartache that comes with losing a relative, friend, or beloved gathering spot (due to a move or parents downsizing), and togetherness only heightens the pain.

KEY SYMPTOM: You keep extra-quiet—or skip activities altogether. “People who are grieving may not acknowledge the empty seat at the table because it’s likely upsetting, or may avoid parties because they can’t bear the idea of engaging in festive small talk,” says Allison Gilbert, author of *Passed and Present: Keeping Memories of Loved Ones Alive* (Seal Press, 2016).

HOW TO HANDLE IT: Rather than running from the feeling, lean into it and embrace nostalgia. Gilbert suggests placing photos of past celebrations and lost loved ones at the center of the table, or making a dish that someone always cooked; you might even buy yourself a present you think that person would have chosen for you. “It helps make the connections more relevant,” Gilbert says. As painful as it may sound, research has shown gestures like these truly make you feel better and more engaged.

HUFFY-HOST COMPLEX

WHAT’S HAPPENING: Whether it’s because of family tension, work demands, your ambitious to-do list, or all of the above, you’re feeling pricklier than Santa’s whiskers.

KEY SYMPTOM: You are quick to snap, even at the dog. And heaven help anyone who tries to edit or impinge on your holiday agenda.

HOW TO HANDLE IT: Hit pause. “Stop and notice what you’re experiencing,” says Lindsay Henderson, a psychologist who treats patients via the telehealth app LiveHealth Online. “When a feeling is uncomfortable, we make efforts to avoid it. But when we register and identify it, we can move on more easily.” Think it through and you may realize Mom isn’t necessarily trying to hijack Christmas by suggesting you all go to church together, says Gretchen Rubin, author and host of the podcast *Happier*

With Gretchen Rubin; it’s more likely that she truly values the tradition. Henderson, who talks with many patients over the holidays, also offers a tactic she calls “coping ahead”: Build solo time—like a yoga class or a walk—into a family visit. And if you’ve got a friend who’s at her wits’ end, make a plan to see her early in the new year, so you both have something to look forward to.

A CASE OF THE WHY-BOTHERS

WHAT’S HAPPENING: The holiday hype has driven you to disengage. “Withdrawal happens when you’re overwhelmed by stress, guilt, or frustration,” says Henderson.

It can also be a coping mechanism for existential ennui over the passing of time. Unlike with sadness, there may be no underlying reason for this numbness; in fact, you can’t muster the energy to feel sad.

KEY SYMPTOM: You dread the family rituals you normally love, such as the annual family touch-football game.

HOW TO HANDLE IT: Build in activities that will connect you with others, especially children. “When you spend time with kids, they can remind you of the true spirit of the holidays,” says Henderson. Cook with them, go sledding, do something that holds good memories for you—that’ll help prevent you from being passive. And remember:

If an activity is important to someone you love, it may be worth doing out of love for that person, says Rubin: “Maybe you don’t want to, or maybe it’s not convenient, but when you change your behavior, the atmosphere around you changes.” If you don’t want to play ball this year, fine—offer to keep score or take photos instead. When you decide to take part, Rubin adds, you just may pull other folks out of their holiday funk, too.



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