



The Mulberry Report

Solutions For Life

February 2010

The Holiday are Over: So Why Do I Feel the Blahs?

By Ralph Nichols, LCSW, Executive Director

If you're like me, I get really psyched up for the Thanksgiving/Christmas/New Year's holidays. Even shopping in large crowds is fun, and making plans for family gatherings and special events adds to the excitement. Taking a few days off helps too. All the "feel good" brain chemicals (norepinephrine, serotonin and dopamine) are working overtime adding to the euphoric high that many of us experience (even though there are many people who get stressed and uptight during the holidays.) But, then it's all over. The decorations come down; the weather seems colder; the sun seems to always be tucked away behind a blanket of clouds; we leave for work in the dark and get home after dark; and, friends and relatives visiting from out of town have returned home. So, why the heck am I feeling the blahs?

After studying this for a number of years, and, likewise, realizing that in my career only a handful of patients have complained of holiday blues, I've come to realize that a significant number of us experience what experts label as the post holiday blues. For me, I was able to trace it back to my school and college days. With grade school and high school, we had a number of days off throughout the fall for teacher workshops, Thanksgiving and Christmas. For college, it was a much needed holiday break from the rigors of studying. It was a period of time we didn't seem to have a care in the world other than relaxing, having fun and not looking at any textbook. But then, the holiday stretch was over and it was time to return to the classroom in which there was no more time off until spring break. What a bummer!

All of this translates to what many of us experience as adults: simply feeling a bit of a let down as we attempt to settle in for continued cold weather with no vacation time, no major holidays at least until Memorial Day and what seems like no sun for weeks at a time. This has the potential for creating a recipe for depression. Even a "snow day" would help a little.

The psychological dynamics for the post holiday blues begins with our brain getting keyed up for the coming events only to cause a feeling of let down once the events are over. As one author noted, "Hitting January 2nd is like going from 60 to zero in one day." It's back to the books for students and work for those who took some time off. It's no more glitz and glitter and parties. It's almost like settling in for a long winter's nap. The only problem is we cannot sleep it away. So, what do we do? I like to think of it as rebooting our internal computer system.

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"I define joy as a sustained sense of well-being and internal peace - a connection to what matters."

- Oprah Winfrey

Here are some tips on powering through the post holiday blues:

- Use your emotional discomfort as a motivator to conquer the blah feelings.
- Stay connected with friends.
- Get out to a movie.
- Eat out at least once a week, and it doesn't have to be expensive either.
- Organize family pictures particularly if they have been in total disarray.
- Cut out some new recipes and try them out.
- Take care of your body. Exercise regularly.
- Get to a book store and buy a book that strikes you as being worth reading and then read it.
- Rent that movie you've always wanted to see.
- Reorganize personal finances to have a better idea of what comes in and what goes out.
- Begin planning for spring and summer. Maybe that old grill needs to be replaced. You can find some pretty good deals this time of year.
- Finally, take some comfort in knowing you're not alone.

Getting past January and February is important since March winds bring April showers and May flowers. Before you know it, the sun's out, the days are longer, the weather is warmer and it'll be time to put the lounge chairs out on the patio again. I can't wait. But in the meantime, identify those things in your life that matter and pursue them.

Mr. Nichols is a graduate of Indiana University School of Social Work with over 38 years of clinical experience in mental health. He is the Executive Director of Mulberry Center, Inc.