



JLAP: Post-holiday blues: Yes, it really is ‘a thing’

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By Terry Harrell and Loretta Oleksy

You may or may not be aware of it, but at JLAP we are sensitive to the reality that a lot of people feel pretty crummy right after the holidays. We talk to lawyers a lot about how they are feeling and our observations are that despite all the advice on how to avoid feeling stressed during the holidays, more people struggle after the holidays than during the holidays. We don't have a study to back this up — just lots of experience. This varies from just feeling a little out of shape and out of sorts to a full-blown episode of clinical depression. Whether you meet diagnostic criteria or have a milder version of “feeling crummy,” we wanted you to know that you are not alone and there are reasons why many people feel less than their best in January and February.



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To start with, many experience a literal and/or figurative holiday hangover. Some of us eat or drink too much during the holidays and ignore experts' advice to continue exercising during the holidays. The result is that our bodies don't feel well and need some attention. We also may need to recover from an intense schedule that included little down time and perhaps too much time with people for us introverts — even if we love the family and friends we were with very much. Perhaps our expectations for the perfect holidays were too high and went unmet. Maybe we missed family members or friends who were not present.

Even if your holidays exceeded your expectations and you stuck with your exercise and eating plan over the holidays, there are still some reasons why you might experience a letdown or some problems with your mood after the first of the year. Let's face it, the weather in Indiana in January and February stinks. This can make some people more vulnerable to clinical depression and cause even Hoosiers without clinical depression to want to hibernate on the couch until spring. Then, the credit card bills from last-minute holiday shopping arrive and the next thing you know you have to sit down and work on your taxes. If that isn't depressing enough, there are only two observed holidays between Jan. 1 and Memorial Day in May. After all the time off and celebrating in November and December, that seems pretty bleak.

So, what can we do to protect ourselves or pull ourselves out of a January/February slump? First, if you are already taking an antidepressant, now is not the time to stop. There may be an appropriate time to work with your doctor to wean yourself off, but why do it in the midst of the gray Indiana winter? If you think your antidepressant isn't helping as much as it should, check with your physician to see if you need an adjustment. The same applies if you are seeing a counselor. If you find yourself struggling between

appointments, you don't have to grit your teeth and hang on until your next appointment; call and see if you can get in a little sooner. We lawyers may pride ourselves on being tough, but there's no award for toughing it out with depression.

If you are not currently in treatment but wonder whether you should be, call JLAP. Your call is completely confidential, and having a safe person to talk openly with is never a bad idea. We can help you determine whether your January slump is something that can be addressed with lifestyle changes or whether you may need a referral to a professional. JLAP also provides free and confidential peer support through our JLAP volunteers and our monthly support groups for various issues.

If your post-holiday letdown is just that, there are many lifestyle changes you may find useful to get yourself through the dreary Indiana winter. Take a cue from Elle Woods: "Exercise releases endorphins. Endorphins make people happy."

Movement is one of our front-line defenses against depression. You don't have to run a marathon or make it to the CrossFit games to reap the benefits; just getting moving is enough. Find the activity that works for you, and start slowly to avoid injury and build sustainable lifestyle changes.

Activity trackers can be a useful tool; some remind you to move periodically or allow you to join challenges with friends. Identifying a workout buddy can also help keep you on track and make your exercise time more enjoyable.

Once you've gotten yourself moving again, it's important to make sure you are recovering with sufficient sleep. In our fast-paced society, some may wear their sleep deprivation as a badge of honor, but insufficient sleep has serious physical and mental health consequences.

If your sleep patterns were disrupted during the holidays, make an effort to get back on a regular sleep schedule and strive for at least seven hours a night. If you struggle with sleep, a regular schedule will help. Other helpful hints for restful sleep from the American Academy of Sleep Therapy, Treatment & Therapy:

- make sure the bedroom is quiet, dark and a comfortable temperature
- avoid electronics around bedtime; they emit light waves that disrupt melatonin production
- essential oils such as lavender and lemongrass can promote relaxation
- magnesium can promote relaxation; ask your doctor if a supplement might help, or try a warm Epsom salt bath

Just as movement and sleep are important, good nutrition is a major factor in physical and mental well-being. To help your body recover from the holiday sugar hangover, follow the 80/20 rule and eat nutritious, whole foods most of the time while still allowing yourself an occasional treat to keep the change sustainable. Add a green smoothie to your routine for an easy and tasty boost of veggie consumption.

The dreary months of January and February can zap our vitamin D levels. Be sure to get outside when we do have a sunny day and ask your doctor if a vitamin D supplement is right for you. Speaking of sunlight, if the lack thereof is bringing your mood down, a therapy light may help. Using one in the morning may also help regulate your sleep patterns. (Therese Borchard, "Going Off Antidepressants: When's the Right

Time?" The Huffington Post, Oct. 25, 2011.)

Additionally, as tempting as it is to hibernate in the winter months, isolation plays a major role in depression. Stay connected to friends and colleagues to protect your mental health.

Finally, if you've made all the lifestyle changes and you are still struggling, please don't be afraid to reach out for professional help. If you find yourself asking if this is as good as it gets, there is hope and a referral to a good doctor or counselor can be the first step to feeling better.

With some effort, your mood and energy levels can be managed through an Indiana winter. And remember, spring is just around the corner. •

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