

The following tips were collected by NAMI Connection facilitators from all over the country.

TIPS FOR COPING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

- ❖ Stay close to family and friends who understand your illness.
- ❖ Take your medications as prescribed. Be sure to get the sleep you need.
- ❖ Celebrate the holidays in ways that are comfortable for you.
- ❖ The holiday season does not stop feelings of sadness and loneliness. Give yourself permission to work through these feelings.
- ❖ Don't compare this season with previous ones. Enjoy all the little things you have now.
- ❖ Talk about the stress you feel with family and friends.
- ❖ Keep expectations manageable. Plan your work and work your plan.
- ❖ Set a budget and stick with it. Many items that you can give do not cost money – a phone call to a friend may mean more.
- ❖ Do something nice for someone else. Do something nice for yourself.
- ❖ Stay out of department stores.
- ❖ Play your favorite non-holiday music.
- ❖ Celebrate the New Year in a way that is comfortable for you.
- ❖ Surround yourself with close friends who understand your feelings about the New Year.
- ❖ Reflect on positive memories from the past year and try to build on them.
- ❖ Don't allow yourself to dwell on the negative. If the negative thoughts come, acknowledge them and let them go. Return to a positive thought or memory. Don't beat yourself up for having a negative thought.

Remember that the holiday season does not magically banish all reasons for feeling sad and lonely; sometimes holidays can seem to magnify those feelings. It can be a little easier to get through the holidays when you look for things to appreciate and focus your thoughts on those positive things.

- ❖ Don't dwell on past losses.
- ❖ Do work through unresolved grief.
- ❖ Do remember that there will be a difference between the ideal holiday image and the reality of one's life. Try not to dwell on any disappointment you may experience.
- ❖ Don't accept the role of victim – get out of the house if you can and enjoy the sunshine (when you have it) and fresh air.
- ❖ Remember, celebrations are what you make them – and make them comfortable for you. Create new (comfortable) memories.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS AND HEALTHY NEW YEAR TO EVERYONE!



A Guide for Planning a Stress-Free Holiday

Ditch the great expectations

The biggest stress is expectations—those that others have of us and those we impose upon ourselves. Expectations of how the holidays should be may keep us from enjoying a period of simpler, more meaningful joys.

Start planning now:

10 weeks in advance (October)

Start pre-planning. Lay out a timetable and don't get caught in the feeling of being rushed to fit things in at the last minute

Check the calendar now. When do Christmas Day, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Sikh and other holidays occur?

Ask yourself **questions about previous holidays** to define your planning, i.e. what do you remember best about the holidays? What was draining and stress-producing? Is there something about holiday time you'd like to re-capture?

Use your answers to make healthful changes to lessen stress this year. If family and friends will be involved in your new plans, **propose and negotiate changes with them now**, before schedules are set.

Determine who will help. We don't have to do it all and we don't have to do it all alone. Enlist others, set priorities, and simplify!

8 weeks in advance (beginning of November)

Set limits according to your personal situation.

Other ways to control holiday pressures:

eliminate a stressful long-distance visit that you've made in previous years.

If certain rituals trigger sadness, change them or **create new traditions** to replace them.

Organize your gift list. **Shop now** to avoid crowded stores and out-of-stock items.

6 weeks in advance (mid November)

Wrap and label gifts. Keep a list, but put items in a closet or at a friend's house.

Create a list of food specialties you enjoy making, choosing only those that can be baked or cooked and frozen in advance. Begin making those items now and freezing them for holiday parties.

If you enjoy sending **holiday cards** or letters, prepare them now.

4 weeks in advance (Late November, Early December)

Are you entertaining at home? **Assign guests to bring dishes** that must be prepared fresh, such as salad.

Sometimes, **family events may be too stressful**. For some people, **not** being with family is actually a good idea."

Make alternate plans, so you'll feel comfortable declining graciously.

If you feel you must attend, **line up friends to support you in person, by phone or via email**.

Volunteer to help out at a hospital, food pantry, or shelter.

The final (sometimes-crazy) days

You may start having **symptoms of stress** (headache, diarrhea, anxiety, etc.) as the holidays draw near. If so:

Listen to your body and **slow down**.

Eliminate anything left on your to-do list.

Get at least **seven to nine hours sleep every night**.

Take daily walks with a friend, a dog or soothing music on your headphones.

If you use a gym regularly, but the holidays have thrown you off schedule, **take time for a work-out**. Your emotions and your body will thank you.

Take a few **deep abdominal breaths** to calm you.

<http://www.healthywomen.org/wellness/emotionalwellbeing/destresstheholidays#>

Bipolar Disorder – Handling the Holidays

With a little planning you can avoid holiday depression, anxiety, and mania -- and enjoy the season.

By R. Morgan Griffin

The holidays can be a tricky for anyone. But people with bipolar disorder may anticipate November and December holidays with real dread -- and depression. "The holidays can be very hard for people with bipolar disorder," says Raymond L. Crowel, PsyD, vice president for mental health and substance abuse services at the National Mental Health Association. You'll probably face loads of possible triggers: relatives, stress, exhaustion, and the temptation to overindulge, to name a few. Slipping into a mood swing may be much easier than usual.

So what should someone with bipolar disorder do when the holidays roll around? Be a Scrooge and opt out? Hibernate? You don't have to do either. These are tips to help people with bipolar disorder weather the holidays -- with tips on avoiding depression and mood swings, planning, enjoying the season, and more.

Bipolar Disorder: Why the Holidays Can Be Hard

- Disrupted schedules. "The biggest single problem with the holidays for people with bipolar disorder is that they take them out of their routine," says Ellen Frank, PhD, director of the depression and manic depression prevention program at the University of Pittsburgh's Western Psychiatric Institute & Clinic.
- Studies show that people with bipolar disorder do best when they're on a schedule -- getting up, eating, exercising, and going to bed at roughly the same time each day. Even the loss of just one night of sleep can trigger a mood swing. But during the holidays -- when you may be traveling across time zones, partying, or staying up until the wee hours -- it's all too easy to get off track.
- Over-stimulation. Shopping, decorating, and preparing for the holidays can leave you excited and anxious. Some family reunions aren't always happy. Any excess stimulation can trigger a swing toward holiday depression or mania.
- Shorter days and longer nights. Some people with bipolar disorder find their mood swings are related to the seasons. Depression is more common in the fall and winter in the northern hemisphere, says Michael E. Thase, MD, professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.
- Holiday "cheer". The holidays are a time when excessive drinking is often tolerated, even encouraged. Though unwinding with alcohol can be tempting, it can be bad for people with bipolar disorder. Not only can it interfere with medicine, it may also ruin sleep and make you more prone to mood swings.
- Excessive spending. It's the season when it seems everyone is running up their credit cards. If you have a history of excessive spending and grandiose gift-giving during hypo-manic or manic episodes, you are clearly at risk.
- Missing your medication. When you're busy, it's easy to forget about your medication. You may even feel tempted to skip a few doses on purpose: it might make it easier to tolerate alcohol, or being a little hypo-manic may give you the energy to get errands done. But when you have bipolar disorder skipping your medication is always risky, since it makes your mood less stable.
- Believing the hype. We all know how we're supposed to feel at the holidays: brimming with joy, good will, and love. But a lot of us don't really feel that way. Being depressed during the holidays can really make you feel out of step, which adds to feelings of isolation.

Planning for Holiday Success When You Have Bipolar Disorder

It's very easy to let the holidays dictate your life. You *have* to go shopping. You *have* to go to your office party. You *have* to bake four batches of Christmas cookies. It can make you feel completely powerless. Your own needs become irrelevant. The key is to **take control** before that happens. "Where is it written that you *must* do all these things?" The key to a successful holiday is to plan for it well in advance. Here are a few tips that may help ease your holidays:

- Scale back your expectations. Be easy on yourself. The gifts don't have to be perfect. Neither do the decorations. Or the turkey. Or anything.
- Think twice before playing host. The preparations for a holiday dinner (shopping, cooking, cleaning) can be over-whelming for a person with bipolar disorder. So make sure you are really up to it. If you do host, simplify. Pare down the guest list. Cook something you can prepare in advance. Ask for help from friends or family.
- Be open and direct with your family. Tell them what you need this year. If the usual family gathering of dozens seems like too much, see if your family might cut down the guest list. Obviously, this could cause conflict with the rest of the family. But if the extended family members really care about the person with bipolar disorder they should understand.
- Make this year different. If holidays have not gone well in the past, **make changes.** Instead of doing the usual dinner at home, go to a restaurant. If staying with your in-laws hasn't been good for you, check into a nearby hotel instead. Or simply get away from all the holiday hubbub and go on vacation.
- Spread out the visiting. Shift some of your visits into October and January, instead of trying to fit in everyone in November and December.
- Increase the number of check-ins. You might want to step up the schedule of appointments with your therapist or check-ins with your family and friends. It's a good way of staying grounded.

Bipolar Disorder & Shopping Sensibly

It's very easy to get caught up in the frenzy of the season and become fixated on finding everyone the perfect gift. But again, you need to stay in control -- especially if you're prone to unhealthy buying sprees. Here are some suggestions:

- Keep perspective. Don't get too caught up in finding the best gift for everyone. It's not worth the anxiety -- and besides, your nephew would probably be happy with a check anyway.
- Stick to a budget. If you have a problem with overspending, come up with an explicit budget well before the holidays arrive. You may want the aid of a friend or family member to help you stick to it.
- Spread out the shopping. Try to shop ahead. Set Halloween (or earlier, if you can manage it) as a great time to start looking.
- Shop online. If you have access to the Internet, online shopping is a low-stress way to avoid the mall's hassles. For a little extra, some sites may even gift wrap.
- Go for gift certificates. Just about everyone loves a gift certificate. And they don't have to be impersonal. Choose one that fits the person: get your sister one from her favorite boutique and your uncle one from a restaurant he likes.

Caring for Yourself

The holidays are a time when we're encouraged to think about other people instead of ourselves. That's fine, to a point. But if you focus so much on other people that you neglect yourself, you're at higher risk of descending into mania or depression. That's not good for anyone. Your first order of business during the holidays has to be taking care of yourself, if you don't, all sorts of bad things can happen."

So this holiday season, plan ahead, keep to your schedule, and scale back your expectations. If you do, you can beat holiday depression, mania, anxiety, and hassles -- and enjoy the season. That's good for you as a person living with bipolar disorder (or any mental illness) and for your loved ones too.

Source: <http://www.webmd.com/bipolar-disorder/features/bipolar-disorder-handling-the-holidays>