Fight the Funk

What to do when anxiety and depression build at holiday time

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In the classic film It's a Wonderful Life, Jimmy Stewart plays a depressed businessman who decides to commit suicide on Christmas Eve. Although many people believe that individuals are more prone to taking their life during this festive season, the notion is a myth, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.

Nevertheless, a variety of polls conducted intermittently by mental health organizations find that plenty of folks report they suffer more intense feelings of anxiety or depression when Thanksgiving, Christmas, Kwanzaa or New Year's Eve roll around.

There are many reasons why the holidays can trigger apprehension, sadness and despair. Common culprits include grief over lost loved ones, disillusionment about the season and its accompanying pressures and the feeling of being socially isolated from others.

"My patients often struggle with the holidays at this time of year," says Ken Duckworth, MD, medical director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "I encourage them to practice good self-care."

This means control what you can. Stick to your normal routine as much as possible, get enough sleep and exercise, eat and drink in moderation, avoid alcohol and other substances if you're feeling stressed, and set reasonable expectations for shopping, entertaining and socializing.

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