

*Barely holding
it together?
Been there, felt that.*



Get Your Cheer Back

EVERYONE IS CELEBRATING...BUT YOU'D RATHER CRAWL UNDER A ROCK. THE HOLIDAY SEASON IS LIKE THAT FOR MANY OF US. WE SEE YOU—AND WE'VE GOT YOU. HERE, A COPING STRATEGY FOR WHATEVER HAS YOU DOWN.

By Kristen Mascia

Every year when *It's a Wonderful Life* starts playing on a loop, I sit down to watch it, usually with a tissue box the size of Brazil on my lap. It was my dad's favorite movie, and this is my little tribute. We lost him to cancer in 2008.

The first Christmases without him were undeniably difficult. Over the years I've learned to cope in small ways—like by reminiscing with *George Bailey*—but I still steal away around the holidays to indulge in a private cry or two.

The truth is, for many of us, November through January is anything but wonderful. Between work stress, endless to-do lists, family dysfunction, grief, and financial strain, the holidays can make us feel grinchy. Add to that the avalanche of TV, social media, and ad messages proclaiming that we should be our sparkliest selves. The result: Nearly two-thirds of women experience depression this time of year, per one survey. Which is why it's key to remember that feeling yuck isn't just normal, but common. While you can't prevent every disaster that comes your way, you can formulate a handle-it strategy ahead of time. So when the coal hits the fan, you'll react in the healthiest way possible.

WHEN YOU'RE JUST PLAIN BLUE

Experiencing low days here and there is normal, but when the drearies interfere with your day-to-day functioning, it's time to get help. You could have a form of depression triggered by the holidays or by literally darker days. If you are dragging yourself out of bed in the morning, not sleeping (or sleeping too much), eating less or more than usual, wanting to cry more often, or having suicidal thoughts, call a professional ASAP. In a crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255)—or for resources, text NAMI to 741741 to reach the National Alliance on Mental Illness.



The Challenge

YOU'VE LOST SOMEONE

Whether they passed recently or long ago, it's natural to miss loved ones. You may find yourself hurting more one year than another, or feel a sudden stab in the gut when you least expect it. Instead of trying to suppress your grief, look at the holidays as a chance to release pent-up emotions, says Dale Larson, PhD, a professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University. Talking about your loved one can feel good, as can coming up with a new ritual to honor her memory, like playing her favorite music while lighting the menorah. Let yourself be happy if the spirit moves you. Starting to feel okay is a normal part of the healing process.

The Challenge

YOU WERE LAID OFF

One of the top stressors over the holidays? Work. (Money is the other; they often go hand in hand.) In the past 10 years, layoffs have tended to occur in December and January—likely due to costs being cut and budgets being retooled for the new year. If you've recently become unemployed, holiday parties can be great networking opportunities. (Really!) When your cousin asks how work is going, tell him you're actively looking and see if he'll introduce you to his friend with the cool job you've always wondered about. If moolah is tight, remember, you don't need to shell out a lot to make the season special. Suggest setting a spending limit for family gifts or drawing names from a hat so you're buying for just one person, not the entire crew. (Added bonus: way less wrapping.)

The Challenge

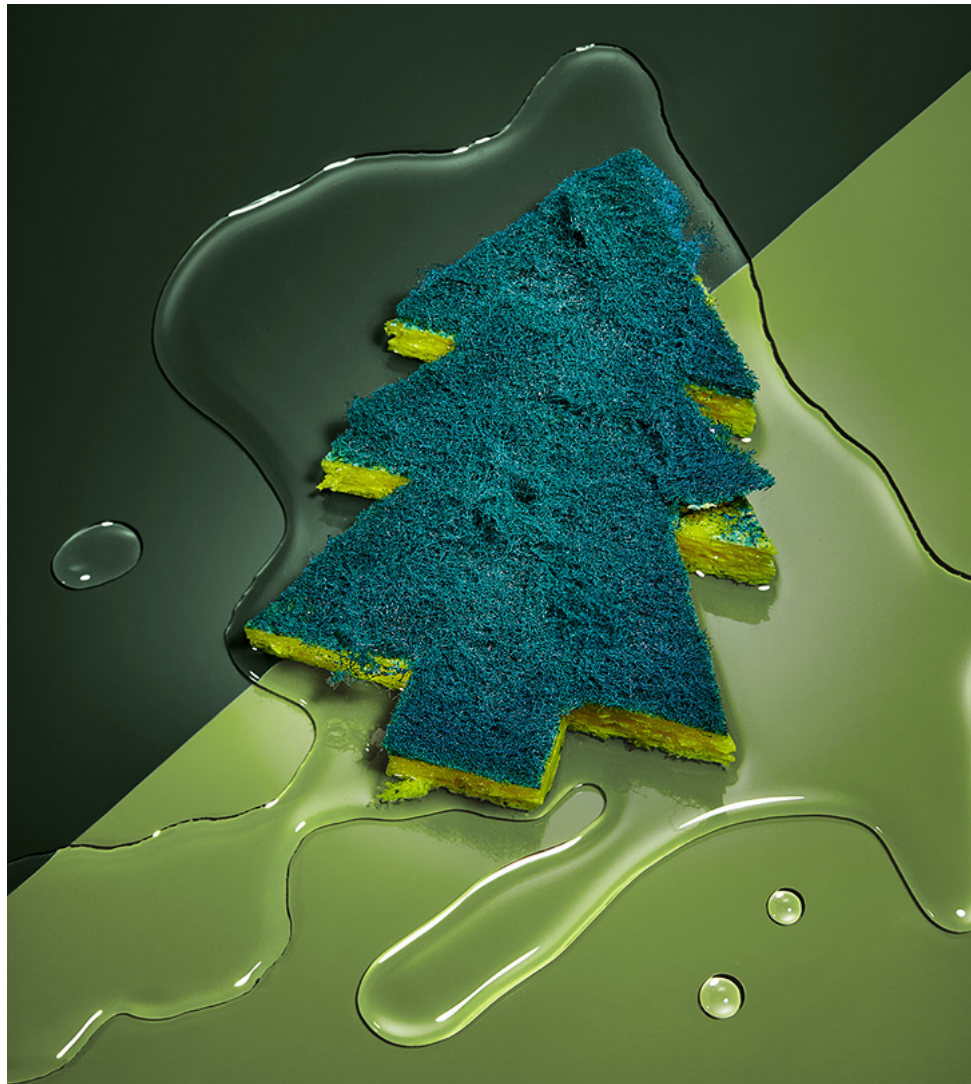
YOUR FAMILY DYNAMIC IS STRESSFUL AS HELL

“The holidays can dredge up memories,” says Nancy Molitor, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Wilmette, Illinois. Some may be joyful (like the Christmas you got a new bike); others, painful (the Thanksgiving after your parents’ divorce). Present-day relationships can also cause headaches. If the very thought of seeing your obnoxious uncle breaks you out in hives, strategize in advance to protect yourself. Limit visits with toxic people based on prior experiences, and plan to take a long walk, suggests Ken Duckworth, MD, medical director at the National Alliance on Mental Illness. And, duh, when hot-button topics like politics come up at the dinner table? Do. Not. Engage!

The Challenge

YOU’RE LONELY

Insta scrolls between now and New Year’s Eve can be a #FOMO nightmare if you’re getting over a breakup, away from your family, or otherwise feeling isolated. “It’s easy to think, *Everyone is so busy, they have so many people to see, but I have nothing,*” notes Lindsay Henderson, PsyD, a psychologist who treats patients via the telehealth app LiveHealth Online. But remember: No one posts the crap presents, the bloated belly, or the afternoons spent watching Ralphie get warned about shooting his eye out. Try swapping screen time for face-to-face interactions. Invite a friend to tackle a holiday-related task with you, and open up to her if you can. Naming your feelings is the first step in overcoming them. You may even find your pal has similar solo emotions, which can help you feel more connected and less alone.



The Challenge

YOU’RE DROWNING IN TO-DOS

The unseen (also: thankless and mind-numbing) labors women perform to keep a family running smoothly multiply at the end of the year, and the overwhelm can be intense. Set reasonable expectations for what you can (and can’t) achieve without sacrificing your sanity, your happiness, or your weekly yoga class. Delegate or outsource where possible. There’s no heroism in tackling everything yourself, and no shame in asking for help, says Molitor.

AVOID AN ANXIOUS ADVENT

Three daily tactics to set yourself up for less stress

- 1. Routine and structure are tonics for an antsy mind.** Wake up at your standard time, have regular meals, and pretend it’s business as usual.
- 2. Sweat on your typical schedule,** even if you’re at your aunt’s house. Exercise is the closest thing we have to a magic bullet for managing mood.
- 3. If you get some free time, don’t burn yourself out trying to spread cheer.** Would you rather watch a movie in your PJs than schlep across town to another party? Own it.

The F word—forgiveness—can free you from negative feelings that weigh you down. But there's often resistance to releasing resentment, and I get it. You may feel justified in holding a grudge or believe forgiving someone absolves them of their actions.

The solution is to see forgiveness as a gift not for the other person, but for *you*. Making this mindset shift doesn't have to be a long, drawn-out, difficult process. All you need is to be willing to forgive, and to follow these steps.

1

SEE THE POSITIVE

Visualize the person you want to forgive. Think about why you love them. If that's a struggle, recall a lesson you learned from your experiences with them. For example, maybe being thrown under the bus by your colleague helped you get better at speaking up for

yourself. Dwell in these positive feelings. Do you feel relief? A softening? Less anger? These are signs you're moving on.

2

FLIP YOUR FOCUS

Instead of spending mental energy feeling disappointed in the person you're upset with, or trying to change

them, accept them where they are. This doesn't mean you endorse their actions; it just gives you space to figure out what you want. You may decide to repair the relationship or choose to walk away from it with grace instead of anger. This is about you, not them.

3

SPEAK OUT

Every morning, repeat this affirmation five times: "I forgive you and I release you." Direct it toward the person who wronged you. (You can even add their name.) Say it silently or out loud. It may seem like nothing, but these positive thoughts can actually reprogram your thinking patterns. Just try it out for a week—trust me.

LET
LET
IT
IT
GO!
GO!



Gabby Bernstein, our monthly columnist on mental well-being, is the author of six books, including *Judgment Detox* and the *New York Times* number one best seller *The Universe Has Your Back*. She is an international speaker and cohosted the Guinness World Records largest guided meditation.