



# PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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## **How Do I Cope With My Grief During The Holidays?**

***By Vincent J. Morello, Ph.D.***

It is ironic how holidays can bring out emotional pain in a way no other time of the year can. Many of us have spoken to friends and co-workers only to find that many people "dread" rather than "welcome" the Holiday Season. And with good reasons. During the holidays we are expected to be cheerful, generous, outgoing, and carefree. For many of us, especially those of us who have suffered due to economic or personal difficulty, behaving in a cheerful, carefree manner can represent a total shift in our mood. We would literally have to be "award-winning" actors/actresses to fake feeling so happy.

It's not that we don't want to share Holiday cheer with others, it is just that the high expectations of the Holiday season serve as a bold reminder of just how difficult circumstances have been. And when we compare ourselves against an abstract ideal—Santa Claus, for example—we can see how far we come up short.

Holiday festivities usually are complicated by family expectations. We often have dinners with people we seldom see and perhaps would like to avoid seeing. We may feel compelled to cook for people, clean for people, and give gifts to people when we really would prefer a vacation from all of the hassle of daily life. No wonder we can feel like Scrooge. So what to do?

First, the list of things to avoid. Take care not to drink alcohol (a central nervous system depressant) in excess, overeat (which brings fatigue), or overwork. Avoid unpleasant company to the extent possible. Try to spend time with people you really enjoy and with whom you share common values. Avoid spending more than you would like simply because it is expected. Buy smaller gifts or give the gift of time doing an activity with someone. Feel good about not going into debt.

Now, what to do. Spend some time with yourself. Slow down. Be at ease. Be aware that many people need to cut back on expenditures. Feel assured that you are like many people. Do something special for yourself and put yourself in the Holiday equation. Give small things to others: a smile, a small compliment, an appreciative remark. Allow yourself to feel "down" if that is how you feel and "accept" help from others if that is what you need. Remember that we all need to "receive" at times if the cycle of giving and receiving is to continue.

A willingness to receive help from others sometimes is the most generous gift of all.

***Talk to someone who can help.*** If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.