



POST-WINTER HOLIDAYS *hibernation or depression?*

By Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed.D. | [PsychCentral.com](https://www.psychcentral.com)

The holiday season is over. The presents are unwrapped. The relatives have left. The leftovers are gone. Some things went well. Some didn't. There were moments of pleasure and joy and moments of disappointment and frustration. The roller coaster of activities and emotions is sliding to a stop. Coming down from the holidays can feel like a come down. But it's also a new beginning.

Not so long ago, winter was a time for lying low, for repairing tools, doing hand work, spinning cloth, and spinning tales. Because the central fire provided the only warmth in colder climates, families gathered around it to entertain children, to catch up on tasks that had been put off or neglected, and to plan for the next season.

In such close quarters, people had to learn get along, to work together and, at times, to respect each other's periodic need for solitude and silence even when huddled together. When spring came, people were rested and ready for the next spurt of activity. As soon as the sap started to run, people and creatures also felt the call to reemerge from their caves (literal or figurative) and get busy.

In a time of central heating, on-demand TV, individual devices, and mass-produced goods, we mostly ignore the natural rhythm to things. Instead of taking a break from our usual work to do needed reflection and plan, we push on. We seem to have forgotten that January and February are for quiet even though

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COUNSELOR CORNER

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Q: With colder months limiting my options to get together with people, how can I avoid feeling isolated?

A: The change to colder weather brings on new challenges to our self-care routines and ability to stay connected. For many people, engaging with their support system is an important component of maintaining overall wellness, making it important to adapt how we connect socially. There are a variety of strategies that can be utilized to stay connected and help combat isolation and feelings of loneliness.

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something in our spirits still longs for a time of hibernation.

Where did we get the idea that once the holidays are over, we're supposed to flip a switch and get back to business as usual? Where did we get the idea that any deviation from full participation and enjoyment of every single minute, regardless of the season, means that something is wrong?

WHAT IS AND ISN'T DEPRESSION?

There's a difference between a genuine diagnosis of depression and the natural wintertime pull to rest and regroup. A diagnosis of a clinical depression requires that five or more symptoms (such as change in appetite, sleeping too much or too little, feelings of worthlessness, suicidal ideation) be present during the same two-week period and present a change from one's usual level of functioning. Please note the "and." Both must be going on. At least one of your symptoms must be a depressed mood or loss of ability to take pleasure in things you usually like. Further, the symptoms must cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

HIBERNATION ISN'T DEPRESSION

If you are simply feeling subdued and a little out of sorts after the holidays, if you are needing more solitude, if you are looking for quieter activities, maybe you aren't suffering from depression. Maybe you are just responding to the cycle of nature. What looks like the blues may be your system insisting on a time for slowing down a bit and for doing internal creative work before the renewal of spring.

If that's the case, try embracing this time and allow yourself a little hibernation.

Do the things that help restore your energy and spirit. Eat right. Move your body. Give yourself the gift of some alone time to think, to



daydream, to read, or to just plain do nothing. Treat yourself to things that pamper you like a hot bath or a massage. Get out in nature. Really talk to a friend. Read to a child. Print out the pictures from your digital camera and put them in albums. Replace buttons. Stay away from people who cause you stress. Spend time with the people who love you the most. Count your blessings.

You can be a good friend without being a party animal. You can take some time and space for personal recovery and reflection without being rude or lazy. By slowing down a bit and de-stressing, you'll actually end up more productive, not less. By setting priorities, you can get important things done and still make room for some healthy hibernation.

DOWNTIME CAN BE GOOD TIME

As you set your house back in order by putting away decorations and using up the last of the party food, consider taking the time to put your mind and spirit back in order, too. The holidays are over. Downtime can be good time when you give yourself permission to rest, regroup, and re-energize. Spring, with all its energy and promise, will be here soon.

COUNSELOR CORNER CONT.

1. Identify the people in your support system. It can be beneficial to identify the people that help you to feel connected and supported. Naturally, we think about friends and/or family as being part of our support network, but there are also opportunities to connect with co-workers, neighbors, support groups or hotlines. Try not to limit yourself; there are a number of individuals in our lives who can help us from feeling isolated.

2. Get creative! There are many ways to stay connected and avoid isolation during the cold-weather months. Try exploring new activities or reinventing old hobbies or traditions.

- Check out local activities for being outside with friends, family, or alone. Go sledding, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or take a stroll through your neighborhood or local park.
- Mix up your standard dinner plans:
 - Have a Zoom or Google Meets dinner with friends or family. Everyone can make their own dinner, eat together, and talk via video chat.
 - Have a socially distanced dinner by placing hula hoops on the floor 6 feet away from each other. Everyone can pick a circle to sit in while they eat and safely be together.
- Write a kind note or make cookies to bring to your neighbors.
- Get a new book or coloring book, and share a copy with a friend.
- Learn yoga or a new skill.

3. Make a plan. Sometimes the hardest part is getting started. This can be especially true during the colder months when we are spending more time inside. Planning activities can be beneficial because it gives us something to look forward to and holds us accountable. Remember to plan things with your support network as well as for yourself. You can still combat isolation alone by bundling up and going for a walk or going window shopping at some stores downtown. Be sure to write these plans down in a planner, a piece of paper on the fridge, or set a reminder in your phone as another way to stay accountable.