



Depression and PI: Avoiding the Blues

Many children with a chronic illness feel depressed, especially during the holidays, but there are many strategies parents can use to help them deal with the sadness.

By Mark T. Haggard

WHEN MY DAUGHTER was younger, she complained about having a primary immunodeficiency (PI) and being “poked” twice a week. I told her that God made her “special” and had a “purpose” for her life. But, she didn’t want to be special and didn’t buy into any talk about a purpose. Frequent sickness and the unrelenting schedule of needle sticks left her in low spirits.

Feelings of depression in PI kids can be caused or exacerbated by a number of things: not being as healthy as other children, not being able to engage in the same activities and being isolated because of frequent sickness. Then, come the holidays. According to the National Institutes of Health, the Christmas season prompts the highest incidences of depression in the general population. Forty-five percent of respondents in a poll conducted in the United States and Canada said that they dreaded the Christmas season. So, what can parents do to help their children cope with the blues, especially around the holiday season?

Steps for Handling Depression

Sadness associated with adjusting to a life-changing situation, like a diagnosis of PI, is grief. Children need time to process and to grieve — to be sad or angry about what they have lost. They need time to consider their new normal. Deborah Serani, PsyD, author of *Living with Depression: Why Biology and Biography Matter along the Path to Hope and Healing*, explains that grieving people should not be made to feel ashamed



about their grief. Although left unattended too long, grief may become depression.

When grief turns into depression, a psychological condition, it must be handled by a health professional with a regimen of medication and therapy. If children are feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, are irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores, parents should take them to talk with a doctor or a mental health professional. In addition, parents should ensure their children make healthy lifestyle changes such as getting the correct amount of sleep, eating well and exercising. Too much sleep worsens feelings of depression, and too little sleep creates mania. What’s more, a

poor diet intensifies exhaustion and impacts mood. Fortunately, something as simple as walking decreases feelings of depression. In fact, as little as 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise can provide an immediate mood boost similar to the effects of antidepressant medications.

Serani recommends parents take a proactive approach concerning the things that cause feelings of depression for their children such as what pushes their buttons and sets them off. And, they should steer their children away from people who are “toxic” and avoid them. However, children shouldn’t be isolated; isolation is the worst enemy of those suffering from feelings of depression. Instead, children with tendencies toward depression need



encouragement to seek out connections that lift their spirits.

Other experts provide these recommendations for parents to help their children fend off depression during the holidays:

1. Get them help. Seek out a mental

others. Media representations of the ideal Christmas with images of smiling family and friends on commercials and TV shows are in stark contrast to what many experience. Smiles are often absent from kids who have not developed strong

take action and suggest their kids do interesting and fun things and focus on what the holidays are about: loving, kindness, generosity of spirit and gratitude for others in their lives.

7. Volunteer. Take your kids with you to volunteer your time to help others. Work at a soup kitchen, organize a gift drive or simply help the neighbor dig the snow out of his driveway. Take part in church or synagogue activities that focus on the true meaning of Christmas or Hanukkah.

8. Don't abandon healthy habits. Overindulgence during the holidays only adds to stress and guilt. Give kids a healthy snack before holiday parties so they don't go overboard on sweets. And, make sure that children get plenty of sleep and physical activity such as going to play in the park.



Have a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays

I have been fortunate. Although my daughter has lamented her condition, she has never suffered from the holiday blues. She loves the lights, music, decorations and presents too much. If this is not the case for your children, there are numerous helpful tips available on how to handle the holiday blues, many of which can be applied to children with chronic illnesses such as PI. Using these strategies may prove effective in achieving a happy and healthy holiday for your children. ■

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Resources

Serani, D. *Living with Depression: Why Biology and Biography Matter along the Path to Hope and Healing*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011.
Williams, R. Why Some People Get Depressed at Christmas. *Psychology Today*, Nov. 28, 2010.
Kerr, M. Holiday Depression. *Healthline.com*, March 29, 2012.
Mayo Clinic. Stress, Depression and the Holidays: Tips for Coping: www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/stressmanagement/indepth/stress/art-20047544.depth/stress/art-20047544.

health professional who can evaluate them and determine if they really are depressed.

2. Allow children to acknowledge their feelings. It's normal to feel sadness and grief, and it's OK for children to take time to cry or express feelings. Parents cannot force their children to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

3. Teach children to be grateful for what they have in life, rather than letting them focus on what they don't have. Parents can help their children avoid excessive rumination about their lives and the potential limitations of their disease.

4. Don't accept any "perfect" representation of Christmas that the media, institutions or other people try to impose on

friendships because of their disease. Parents can lower their children's expectations and any attachments to what the holidays should look like, and they should focus on being present and enjoying each moment as best as they can. If children aren't up for an event, it's OK to leave and tell others: "We're not up for this right now."

5. Allow children to say no. Saying yes when parents should say no can leave their PI kids feeling overwhelmed. Friends will understand if you cannot participate in every project or activity.

6. Reach out to others. When feeling lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events that can offer support and friendship. Parents can