

## *Diversity and the Holidays*

By Janet Bell, Chief Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Officer

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How many holidays can you name that occur in the month of December? For many, especially in the United States, Christmas is the main focus of December. The entire month is spent attending various parties, gift-giving, and enjoying time with family and friends. But what about those who don't celebrate Christmas? Is December any less meaningful to them? For more people than you think, December is a careful dance of avoidance and reluctant attempts to assimilate, not because there is anything "wrong" with them, but because they celebrate less mainstream holidays or no holiday at all. Navigating the month-long Christmas celebrations can feel, to many, like walking through a minefield.

But few months present as many cultural opportunities to explore diversity as December. Let's get educated!

The following page offers examples of a few of the holidays that will also be celebrated this month. Please click on each link below to learn more about other special days that have been, or will be, celebrated this December.

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# *Diversity and the Holidays (Continued)*

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## December 2021 Featured Holidays

- ◆ Nov. 28-Dec 6: [Hanukkah](#) (*This year, Hanukkah took place November 28-December 6*)
- ◆ Dec. 05: [St. Nicholas Eve](#)
- ◆ Dec. 08: [Bodhi Day](#)
- ◆ Dec. 13: [Santa Lucia Day](#)
- ◆ Dec. 21: [Yule](#)
- ◆ Dec. 21: [Winter Solstice](#)
- ◆ Dec. 25: [Christmas](#)
- ◆ Dec. 26: [Kwanzaa](#)
- ◆ Dec. 26: [Boxing Day](#)
- ◆ Dec. 31: [OmisoKa](#)

*...think of inclusivity at this most wonderful time of the year, and acknowledge the wonderful diversity of our colleagues, friends, and neighbors.*

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Whew! That's quite a list. It is also important to remember that some people do not celebrate any specific holiday. For many people, this month marks the beginning of winter. For others, the last days of the calendar year. Therefore, it is very important to think inclusively at this most wonderful time of the year, and acknowledge the wonderful diversity of our colleagues, friends, and neighbors.

Last year, SHRM Rio Grande Valley published an article on this very topic. I enjoyed the following article so much, I wanted to share it with you. As you read it, think about ways you can think more inclusively about the December holidays.



# Diversity During the Holidays

## *Not Everyone Celebrates*

That's right. Not everyone celebrates the holidays. The Christmas fanfare can easily overlook diversity when the holiday season is marketed and materialized as a Christian holiday and is ever-present at stores and malls across America. Millions of people all over the United States don't celebrate the conventional Christmas. Many non-Christian persons, such as Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews - among others, or as individuals with no religious affiliation - possible atheists or agnostics, see the bustle and make the season a manageable situation.

This year presented a different kind of holiday environment. Many employees were still working remotely and have been doing so for the last six to eight months, while others are reporting to work on a daily basis or when expected to work on a hybrid schedule, yet still, a lot of greetings and warm sentimental messages have been and will be exchanged.

- ◆ Mark your calendars with holidays like Hanukkah, Ramadan, Kwanzaa, and Diwali, for example. Find out the dates and record them as reminders. If you send out greetings about Christmas, send one out for other holidays too. If your company's email or software program allows it, add calendar dates for celebrations from different parts of the world. Doing this implies that as a company you appreciate diversity.
- ◆ Make no expectations. Realize that people celebrate a variety of holidays during this time of year, and some people choose to celebrate none. Don't make assumptions about people, but on the same note, don't be afraid to ask what holidays they celebrate. Asking the general question, "What holidays do you celebrate?" can open the line of communication and awareness. Let it be an opportunity to learn about different cultures, religions, and the traditions that are followed.

Another way employers can appreciate diversity is by making all employees feel included and respected in the workplace. Below are several extra things employers can do to make their workplaces more inclusive during the holidays.

- ◆ Make sure that your holiday party isn't a Christmas party in disguise. Make the decorations and food general and not specific to any religion.
- ◆ Post holiday greetings on your webpage and intranet for many religious holidays.

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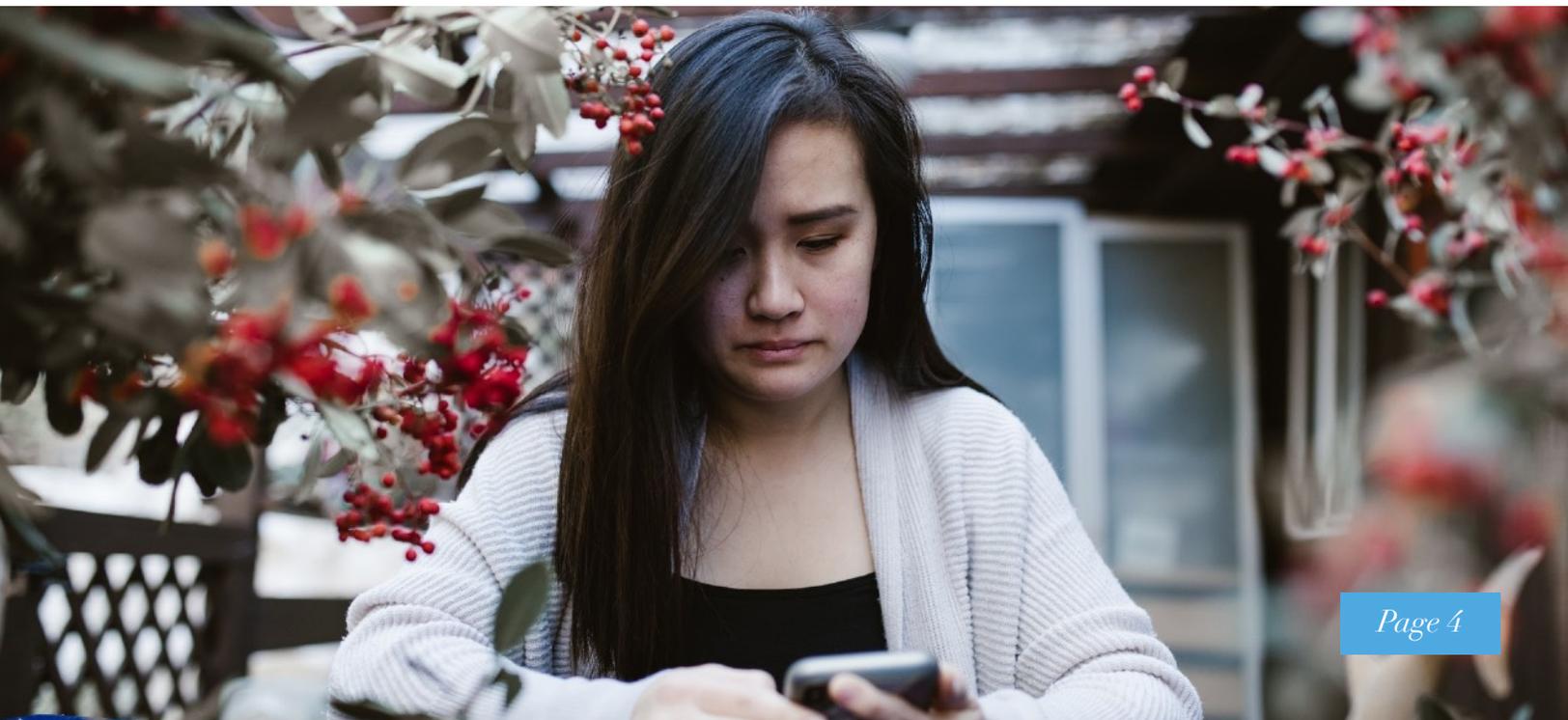
## *Not Everyone Celebrates (Continued)*

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- ◆ Consider having a New Year's party instead of a holiday party. This type of party can get everyone on board with the company's mission and vision for the New Year. Some companies elect to skip holiday parties and hold a party during the company's birthday month or during a less busy time of the year so that more employees and their spouses and partners are able to attend.
- ◆ Practice respect for these special dates and plan events and meetings around various religious holidays. Don't serve a holiday luncheon on the day when some employees may be fasting for Ramadan. Serve vegetarian options at the company hot dog lunch and for that matter, whenever the company orders and serves food.
- ◆ Display a multi-cultural calendar to help all employees stay aware of important cultural events for the rest of the year.
- ◆ Treat the needs of different employees about religious or holiday celebrations with flexibility. Consider offering floating holidays as part of your paid holiday schedule.
- ◆ Encourage employees to share their celebrations through stories, decorations, and foods that they can bring to their workplace. In one workplace, to celebrate his Polish heritage, an employee brings Paczki to work on Fat Tuesday, also known as Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras, the day to indulge before Lent begins.

*Note: This blog post was inspired by and adapted from The Balance Careers, Human Resources, the Work/Life Balance by Simma Lieberman. Other contributions added by S. Charles-Garza, SHRM RGV Blog Contributor, Diversity Director, 202*

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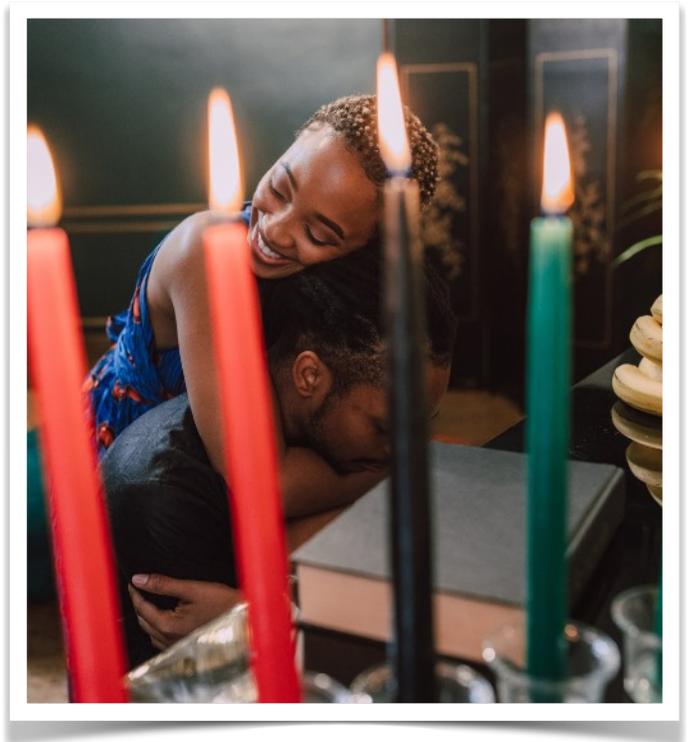
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# *Sensitivity and the Holidays*

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It was a very good year! December is finally here! I love the hustle and bustle of this month. It seems that time begins to fly, there is so much to do, the air feels crisper, and there is a special quality of cheer everywhere. I love it! That's my reality. But I am fully aware that this is not how everyone experiences December.

While understanding the diversity of holidays is important. It is also important to acknowledge that others may have personal reasons for wanting to steer clear of December festivities. For instance, people who are grieving, depressed, or otherwise dissatisfied with some aspect of their lives can find the holidays to be painful reminders of who or what they're missing. I spoke with one co-worker who thought it would be important in this article to remind others that "for many people, the holidays can be a very lonely/sad time. The days are short and dark and not everyone has family to celebrate with. So, we should be especially sensitive and caring for one another during the "holiday season".



If you are struggling during the holidays, please find ways to be encouraged. The following is an excerpt from a Washington Post article by Jelena Kecmanovic, published on December 11, 2021:

## **Temper Expectations**

No matter how many times we have experienced children's meltdowns, relatives' faux pas, burned food or canceled flights, we seem to have unwaveringly high expectations for the holidays.

"There is even more pressure now to have the best holidays ever to make up for the last year," said Ilyse DiMarco, a clinical psychologist in Summit, N.J. and the author of "[Mom Brain](#)." "Setting the bar lower would be much better for our mental health."

Having lower expectations might be just the reason Danes consistently are among the top in happiness surveys, according to a 2006 article. Maybe we could learn from them and expect that things will not go as planned.

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## *Sensitivity and the Holidays (Continued)*

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“Think about previous holidays, vacations – how it wasn’t all great, or how it probably took you some time to even settle into a nonworking mode,” says Sonja Lyubomirsky, professor of psychology at the University of California at Riverside and the author of [“The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want”](#) “The key is to appreciate what you have, not what you want.”

Finally, moderate your expectations about others’ reactions to your gifts as you are only responsible for thoughtfully choosing gifts – what happens next is out of your control and more a reflection on the gift receiver.

### **Let Go Of ‘Shoulds’**

It’s easy to get overwhelmed with all the things we should do during the holidays. We should send emails or cards with season’s wishes. We should deep clean the house, hunt down all the gifts from our wish lists, cook enough different foods to cater to everyone’s taste and restrictions, package enough cookies to distribute at work, and so on. The to-do list invariably becomes your enemy.

“It’s helpful to realize that we’ll never be able to get everything done. It’s not a matter of having a bad list – all lists exist in the limitless realm of ideas,” said Oliver Burkeman, the author of [“Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals”](#) “Once you strip away the illusion and accept that humans are limited, you are forced to choose what really matters.”

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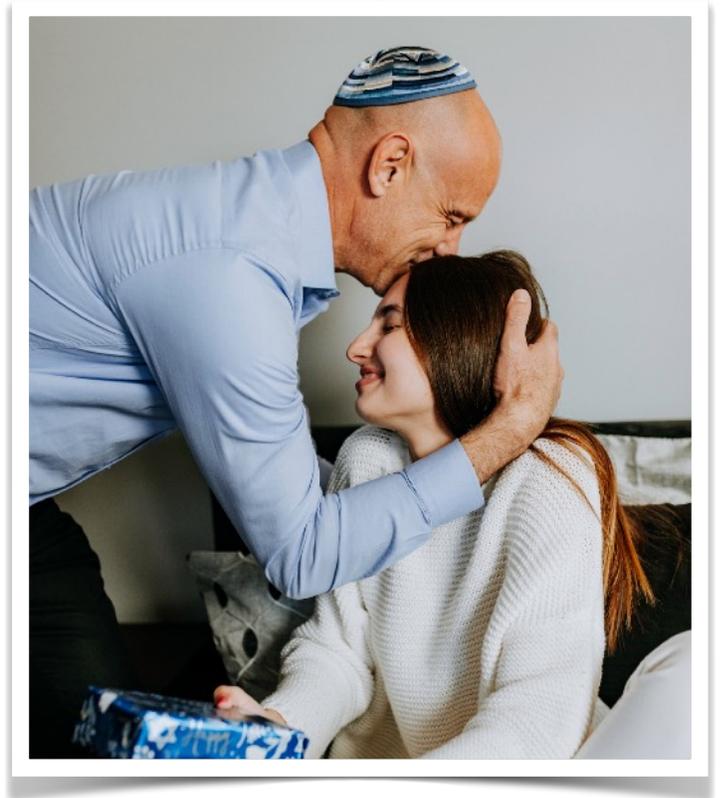
## *Sensitivity and the Holidays (Continued)*

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My patients often express a belief that “if only” they could create a perfect holiday (or gift, vacation, meal, etc.), in which everyone would have a great time, they would feel better and the pain of the pandemic would be overcome. But this is a common thinking trap we all fall prey to: basing our well-being on impossible standards and on the things we cannot control.

Embrace imperfection and simplicity instead, letting everyone know in advance what adjustments you are making to reduce holiday stress. “It is liberating to accept there’s no perfection, and this will also resonate with others,” Burkeman said.

Finally, Lyubomirsky cautions not to get caught up in unhealthy social comparisons, amplified by social media. Focus on the aspects of the holidays that are most meaningful for you and read the curated Facebook posts about glorious holidays with a grain of salt.



### **Make Space For All Emotions**

One of the most pernicious effects of picture-perfect holidays portrayed in movies, ads and media is an expectation for smiling, joy and happiness, all the time. Although these feelings are common during this season, so are grief, sadness and other negative emotions.

*“After my grandpa died, our already small family had to adjust to an empty seat at the holiday table,” said Elana Cohen, a 31-year-old publicist from Chicago. “And now is the second year that we can’t bring my grandma from her nursing home — it’s heartbreaking. But we are also grateful that we can visit her and really enjoy each other’s company.”*

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# *Sensitivity and the Holidays (Continued)*

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[Research](#) shows that, in general, mixed emotions are much more frequent than we realize. And rather than being harmful, they often strengthen a person's resilience during stressful periods and are related to having a strong sense of purpose or meaning in life.

Moreover, pushing away or suppressing negative emotions ends up [making them stronger and more frequent](#). So allow pain and grief to coexist with the other emotions. Noticing and naming various feelings, talking or writing about them, or expressing them through art can be particularly beneficial.

DiMarco also suggests bringing self-compassion to our experience, realizing that it is human to struggle during the holidays. "You can deliberately incorporate traditions that remind you of your deceased loved one, for example, allowing grief and joy as you talk about them," she said.

## **Be Open To New Traditions**

If you find yourself a hostage to the holiday traditions that are harder and harder to uphold, it might be time to rethink them.

Consider that complicated recipe that requires multiday preparation, resulting in a beautiful dish that nonetheless your family doesn't care for. Or the habit of always gathering at your Aunt Sally's home, despite predictably nightmarish traffic to her place.

How well are these traditions aligning with your values, bringing you closer to what you want your life to be about?

Burkeman suggested giving yourself permission to slow down and reimagine holidays by, for example, ordering food or staying home. You might disappoint some relatives or friends, but "we are always going to let someone down," he said. "So we better be intentional and thoughtful about it."

After Jim Enderle, 63, a retired Navy chief hospital corpsman from Quaker Hill, Conn., returned from deployment, he could not enjoy the holidays for years. He was hypervigilant for any signs of danger because rocket and mortar attacks were most possible during this time of year in Iraq. Even though he had made a pledge never to talk about his wartime experiences, consistent with his "just get through it and pick yourself up attitude," he finally broke down and started sharing difficult feelings that showed up during holidays and other times.

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## *Sensitivity and the Holidays (Continued)*

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*“This brought my wife and me closer than we’ve ever been and led to new traditions during holidays,” Enderle said. “Now I talk about Iraqi civilians I encountered and honor their hardships and lost lives by talking about their humanity.”*

### **Get Out Of Your Head**

When, despite everything, holidays get overwhelming and you find yourself stuck in a ruminate-worry-dread vicious cycle, getting outside can provide quick relief.

*“Light, especially in the morning, activates the brain and is generally important for your mood and mental health,”* said Teodor Postolache, professor of psychiatry at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. *“It is crucial for most people with seasonal affective disorder, but it can be helpful for many of us as days get shorter and colder.”*

When outside, try to move, even if it means just walking around the block. Three decades of research supports the beneficial effects of movement on our psychological health.

Finally, *“try to have experiences that get you out of your mind,”* said Jennifer Stellar, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. *“We tend to feel awe in response to an extraordinary person or object that’s hard to comprehend, outside what you normally encounter.”* And awe can significantly improve our well-being as well as make us feel more connected to others.

Even though a beautiful holiday light display or frozen waterfall are more awe-inspiring, paying attention to your surroundings and finding the extraordinary in the ordinary as you stroll through a local park will probably help, as well.

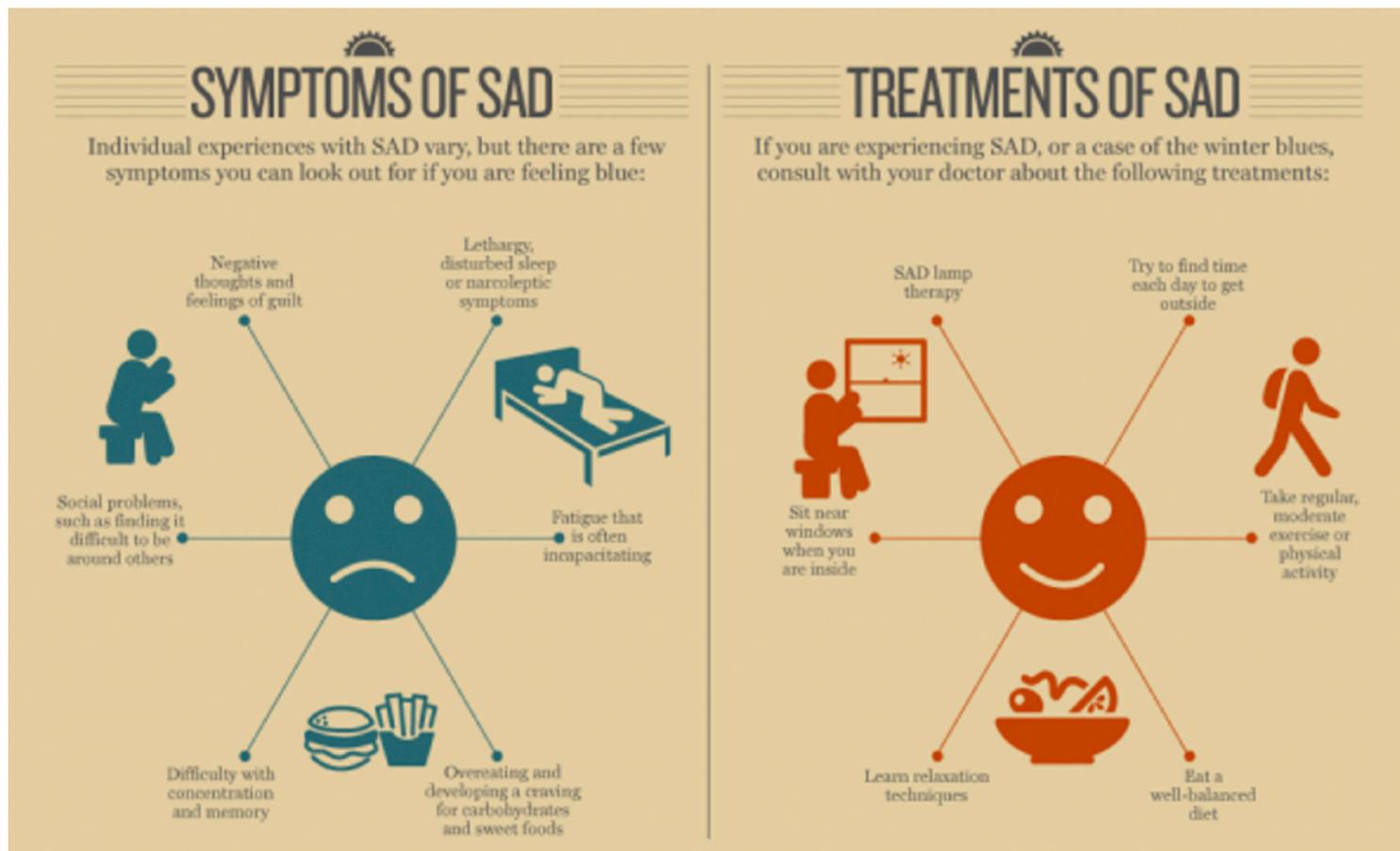
Although this holiday season may fall short of your expectations and include unwanted thoughts and feelings, it can prove to be perfectly imperfect.

# What is Seasonal Affective Disorder

You may be asking, “what is seasonal affective disorder?”. Do not feel bad, many people have never heard of this category of depression.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) the definition of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a type of depression that comes and goes with the seasons, typically beginning in late fall or early winter months and going away in the spring and summer. Often it can also be known as the winter blues or seasonal depression. Depressive symptoms can also be tied to the summer season change but are less common.

Take a look at the graphic to learn about the symptoms and treatments for SAD.



# Resources & Events



## Resources

### ◆ Christmas Around the World

<https://www.kids-world-travel-guide.com/christmas-around-the-world.html>

### ◆ When We Don't Celebrate Christmas

<https://portland.momcollective.com/diversity-advocacy/when-we-dont-celebrate-christmas/>

### ◆ What Did You Do for Christmas: Multiculturalism and Belonging

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/equityDiversityInclusion/2014/01/what-did-you-do-for-christmas-multiculturalism-and-belonging/>

### ◆ Diversity During the Holidays

<https://shrmrgv.shrm.org/blog/2020/12/diversity-during-holidays-not-everyone-celebrates>

### ◆ How to Deal with Holiday Anxiety

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/how-to-deal-with-holiday-anxiety/2021/12/10/43b249d8-5144-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/how-to-deal-with-holiday-anxiety/2021/12/10/43b249d8-5144-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html)

*Whether your winter holidays include celebration of Hanukkah, **Christmas**, **Kwanzaa**, or simply the joy of a new day, may you experience love, light, and happiness!*

*So happy we get to do 2022 together!*

*From The Office of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion*

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Janet R. Bell, Chief Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Officer  
San Cave-Riley, David Diana, Gia Quinones, Greer Pickett