There's no changing it. I'm always miserable from Thanksgiving through New Year's. It's inevitable, and besides, don't most people feel that way? This statement, made with a certainty that seemed to leave no room for argument, was voiced by a patient as the holiday season approached. The patient, a woman in her early 40s and mother of three small children, had entered treatment in mid-August following the onset of panic attacks. The episodes of panic had gradually diminished as we explored the psychological conflicts surrounding the conscious awareness and expression of certain intense affects. When, as Thanksgiving approached, she announced the arrival of what she referred to as "the holiday blues," she described it as a phenomenon of many years' duration.

The patient had no curiosity about the origin of these "blues." She automatically attributed the feelings to the anticipated pressure associated with being the mother of three young children, a dutiful wife, the orchestrator of holiday events, and a professional to boot, a list long enough to make anyone exhausted... but "blue"?

True, her reaction to the approaching holidays was not unique. Most clinicians have patients in their practice as well as friends and relatives who themselves repeat this mantra at the thought of Thanksgiving and Christmas. However, it is the nature of our work to search for understanding of that which others may think of as unremarkable or inevitable—so I looked further in order to learn more.

Exploring the patient's early holiday experiences led to tales familiar to many households. Early memories were filled with remembrance of eager anticipation, excitement about the possible gifts, the Christmas tree, and an expected happy gathering of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

But, intermixed with all of this, was a forbidding sense of potential disaster. An ominous question permeated the atmosphere: "What is Dad going to do this year?" The unpredictability of her father, an alcoholic, always clouded the holiday scene. Sometimes there were violent outbursts with loved ones hurriedly departing to save embarrassment to the family. At other times the holiday passed without incident. All of this resulted in an unexpressed tension, as everyone held their breath, feeling helpless to avoid the anticipated disaster. The patient's holiday blues were a time-cued reaction, in the manner of an anniversary reaction, as she unconsciously anticipated a rageful crisis that needed to be accepted with the same helplessness and passivity with which the family had dealt with her father's behavior.

So called "Yuletide cheer" is a frequent contributor to the crises that erupt at holiday time. Boyer described a similar but even more extreme case example, writing about what he termed the "Christmas Neurosis." The father of one of his patients was an alcoholic whose alcoholism crescendoed at the holiday season, when he held the family hostage to his behavior. The patient's memories included times when, tortured by alcoholic hallucinations and delusions, her father ran around the house naked brandishing a loaded revolver and threatening to kill his family.

The holiday season reawakens the dreams, hopes, and longings of childhood as well as memories of early deprivations, memories and affects that may have been repressed but now reappear with renewed intensity. There are a number of dynamics and interlocking forces that contribute to the frequent occurrence of the holiday blues. The holiday season reawakens the dreams, hopes, and longings of childhood as well as memories of early deprivations, memories and affects that may have been repressed but now reappear with renewed intensity. For many people, there is the expectation that family conflicts will be put aside and holiday cheer will prevail. Even when past events have demonstrated the contrary, the fantasy often persists that this year will be different! But unresolved issues of jealousy, sibling rivalry, envy,
and an intensification of childhood wishes are precipitated rather than dissolved by exhaustion, alcohol, exaggerated hopes, and the unfamiliar intensity of contact with family members. In some respects, the response resembles an anniversary reaction—not in the sense of the pain associated with a specific event being triggered by the anniversary of the occurrence but rather in terms of painful affects and conflicts being timed to occur with increased intensity because the “festive” period arouses certain expectations and then disappointment in their lack of fulfillment.

This is not to say that the feelings that emerge during the holidays don’t have a relationship to the timing of past events. The feelings associated with tragic life events that occurred in proximity to special holidays will quite naturally be triggered with the advent of the season. In writing about anniversary reactions, Dlin2 says that it is the therapist who has to recognize that the problem exists, in order to elicit the related complex chain of events. The same is true of the holiday “blues.”

Contrary to what my patient said, it was not inevitable that the reaction be forever repeated with the same grief and despair. Working together, we uncovered the remembrances of her childhood anxiety, making it possible to identify the manner in which she was repeating feelings from the past that did not fit her current life experience. Her sense of rage and helplessness decreased as she reframed her current experience in terms of the reality of her current world.

Understanding the potential dynamics that accompany holiday festivities provides a backdrop for understanding those patients who consider the “holiday blues” as a normal and inevitable part of life. When the therapist does not accept the “blues” as inevitable, the patient can be engaged in creative exploration of the origins of the feelings.

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The “holiday blues” are similar to anniversary reactions in that the important conflicts are usually disguised and out of conscious awareness. In this sense, the holidays are a potentially fruitful time to revisit the fantasies, disappointments, and conflicts of years past and reframe them in the context of today’s reality. For my patient, it meant recognizing both her grief and mourning for the stable father she never had, as well as her rage at a mother who didn’t take control of the frightening events. She came to appreciate that in today’s world she was no longer a helpless child nor did she have to sit by passively in the event of an unexpected crisis.

References