Fighting the Covid Christmas blues

General Features



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Jo Maughan asks what you can do to nurture your mental health to survive, even thrive, this December

Key Points

What is the issue?

Covid-19 means that December 2020 will be a month like no other. Whether it’s the frustration of working from home or anxiety about how to celebrate Christmas, we are all facing challenges to our mental health.

What does it mean for me?

Know you’re not alone if you’re struggling to cope with the Covid restrictions, but don’t ignore those feelings. Use them as a prompt to nourish your mental health.

What can I take away?

Remember that your manager is there to help. There are simple ways we can all improve our mood. Here are some ways to capture festive cheer despite the impact of Covid-19.

I’m sitting at my red, shiny-topped desk feeling fed up. I look at the bright postcard of the blue and yellow tiled villa in Barcelona next to my screen. No change. I go downstairs and make myself a proper coffee – black, americano. I sit on my grey sofa to drink it. No change. I go upstairs to print out my seven page report to review, and start to read it from the sofa. No change. I still feel glum, fed up and frustrated with Covid-19. You? Many of my coaching clients are feeling variously lonely, depressed, frustrated, sad and despondent, even though Christmas is coming.

You feel as you feel…

You are allowed not to feel OK. You don’t have to feel grateful that you have a roof over your head and still have a job. If you’ve recently lost your job, you don’t have to be positive because you didn’t lose your job in April like your friend. If you’re still able to meet a friend, you’re allowed to feel disappointed that you can’t meet your eight university friends for margaritas at your favourite bar. And if you’re bored with working from home, and crave those ad hoc chats by the coffee machine, and the buzz of the city, that’s okay too. You’re human. We all are. Feeling emotions is part of the human condition.

Sometimes though, the down feelings continue for longer than they normally would. If that’s you, as it was me recently, have you told someone how you feel? Whether you’re struggling with working from home, feeling lonely or something else, tell someone.

I told my next-door neighbour and felt ever so slightly better. It was the turning point, and it was enough to raise me out of my isolation and low mood. I started to do other things that helped lift my mood. (See How I overcame the Covid blues in the box on the next page.)

Taken together, all these things helped. My mood is still going up and down, but generally the baseline is more positive than it was. Now, I'm starting to look forward to Christmas even though it's likely to be a restricted holiday. More on that later, but first, if you've been feeling low for some time and it's affecting your work, what should you do?

Talk to your manager

Many people worry about this, thinking it's a sign of weakness. Actually it's a sign of courage to tell your manager how you're feeling and to ask for help. To make it seem less scary, here are seven steps you can follow to raise these issues with your manager:

1. Talking about your mental health is no different from talking about a physical health matter.
2. Check what support your organisation already has in place. It may have a wellbeing policy. It may offer free resources such as counselling.
3. Focus on the impact that your mood is having on your work and productivity. Your manager is your manager, not your friend, so keep it professional. Plan how much or little you'll disclose.
4. Be clear on what it is you want to request from your manager. Do you want them to just listen and be aware? Or do you want extra support? What might that support be? A wellbeing buddy? Being able to work in the office with colleagues three times per week? Someone to assist you on your main project? Think about this question to prompt ideas – what would you ask for if you knew they would definitely say 'yes'?
5. Choose your moment, whether you do this spontaneously or book in a call. Don't choose the last day of the billing cycle, or when you can hear your manager is stressed by the tone of their voice.
6. Make sure you agree a next step. Where possible make this a shared next step or ensure that you each have an action – this builds commitment. You might agree to consider your manager's suggestions, and that your manager should consider yours. Perhaps you might agree to book an appointment with your GP,

or to have a follow-up chat in a week's time?
7. Implement your agreed next step.

Boost your Christmas spirit

The million-dollar question is: how can you enjoy the festive season even with Covid-19 restrictions? My ideas for work and home, in no particular order, are:

- Put up your Christmas decorations early. Turn on those twinkly lights even in the daytime.
- Swap your working hours around so you have your social, outdoors time in the morning when it's lighter and brighter; work when it's dark outside instead.
- Organise a virtual Christmas party with your colleagues. How about Taskmaster? This is the most fun I've had virtually since the restrictions began. If you don't know what I'm talking about, check out Taskmaster on Channel 4. You'll need to make up your own tasks that are colleague appropriate. How about making a pet using items from your kitchen? Drawing a self-portrait in two minutes? Doing something funny with a toilet roll?
- Have a go at Hygge. Hygge is the Danish practice of creating a mood of cosiness and conviviality to enhance wellbeing – lighting candles, sitting in front of a real fire in your pyjamas and woolly socks, savouring a mug of hot chocolate topped with cream, chocolate and marshmallows. There are lots more ideas online, or just ask yourself: what makes me feel warm and cosy?
- Work out what your Christmas would be in the worst case scenarios. A virtual Christmas dinner with your parents? Christmas Day alone at home? Imagine that actually happening. Whatever happens, if it's not that you'll feel relieved. If that does happen, you'll have already prepared for it, so it won't feel quite so bad.
- Brave the cold. Meet a friend in the park for a walk and chat. Dress for warmth. Take a hot water bottle with you, as well as a hot drink.
- Reintroduce the rituals you loved as a child. An advent calendar? Singing along to Christmas carols? Hanukah candles and treats?
- Get into Christmas baking. Mince pies, yule log, florentines anyone?
- Organise a virtual afternoon tea with colleagues. Everyone receives a mail-order box of afternoon tea goodies on the same day; you all sit down to eat, drink and chat on zoom or MS Teams.

- Hold a virtual film night. You all watch the same movie at home with Zoom or MS Teams on too. A drink in hand and snacks at a your elbow, pause the film every now and then to chat.
- Organise an office Secret Santa. Covid-19 restrictions add a whole new dimension to the ‘secret’ bit.

How I overcame the Covid blues

I acknowledged how I felt. When you acknowledge how you’re feeling, you engage the pre-frontal cortex part of your brain which takes ‘heat’ away from the limbic part of your brain that’s powering your emotions. By acknowledging how you feel, you can also let yourself know that however you feel is okay. Check in with yourself on how you feel every morning, at lunch time and before you go to bed.

I reached out to friends. I’d started to feel quite isolated and a bit lonely, even though I live with Bill, my lovely husband. Looking in my diary, I realised I’d not made any new plans to walk and talk with a friend. I’d forgotten because when I feel low, I get more introspective. I’d forgotten that talking, hearing what my friends are up to, and how they’re feeling, helps. It will help you put yourself into a larger context and gain perspective on how you’re feeling. If your friends haven’t been in touch with you, consider that perhaps they’re feeling low too!

I went for brisk walks in the mornings when there’s bright light. As you walk, it’s important to focus on the detail of what’s around you not your thoughts. Pay attention to the robin cheeping; the shiny green leaves and red berries of the holly; the cold breeze on your cheeks and the white frost below your feet. Consciously breathe in and out and imagine your low mood floating out of you.

I made myself dance round the house even when I didn’t want to. ‘Dancing it out’ can really raise your mood. It helps you get out of your head (and thoughts), and into your body and senses. You feel the music and express how you feel. Your body gets rid of cortisol, the stress hormone, and starts to release endorphins, the feel-good hormones. You feel brighter, just like you might after jogging or running.

I was kind to myself. I ate a dark chocolate truffle with my coffee as a small treat. I watched my favourite TV programme. I baked some rock cakes. What is it that nourishes you? What’s stopping you giving yourself more of that? All these little things will help you generate ‘positive’ emotions in yourself.