

The winter blues and post-holiday depression make for dark days

by Doug Detwiler
Special to Q-Notes



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For me, it begins when the first signs of those dearly departed Christmas trees start showing up at the end of driveways somewhere around the beginning of the new year. Have you too been noticing all the Christmas tree carcasses? Seeing the discarded trees lying sideways, bare, purpose-served, and waiting for disposal, is a sad image.

Or for you, maybe it's the anti-climatic chore of reboxing all those holiday decorations until next year. Stranger still, the mere sight of those lone houses beaming their Christmas lights sometime into February nearly sends me over the edge. Perhaps it is procrastination combined with a futile attempt at holding onto the magic of a season past. Whatever the many signs of the end of the holidays, I have found navigating emotionally from January through March somewhat mood challenging.

Inevitable winter. Growing up in Ohio, I detested this season so much that I began planning my escape of winter's blight. Soon after college, I migrated to sun drenched Southern California (LA) to continue my coming-out process, maintain a yearly tan (how shallow) and flee the dark moods of winter I often experienced in my youth. Moving to California helped considerably. With the help of supportive, gay friends and more opportunities for being outdoors in sunlight and exercise, winter became a non-issue for me. So I wonder, were those winter blues I experienced?

We hear this expression so often this time of year - the winter blues. Chances are, if you ask several people to define "winter blues," you are likely to hear that many different interpretations. Research more commonly associates winter blues with a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).

SAD is a real form of depression with symptoms appearing in the fall or winter and persisting until spring. Some people are unable to adjust to the shortage of daylight as the days grow shorter. Our body's internal clock is set to be activated during daylight and to sleep at night. In response to these changes in daylight, people may develop depressive symptoms. This includes: feeling blue, lethargic, low energy, hopelessness, anxiety and social withdrawal. SAD sufferers also find themselves needing additional sleep, experiencing daytime drowsiness, and are susceptible to weight gain due to the heightened cravings for carbohydrates and sweets.

If you think you might be experiencing SAD, consult with a health professional for an assessment. Depending on the severity of symptoms, treatment usually consists of a combination of exposing oneself to daily light therapy and medication such as an anti-depressant to help with sleep and to elevate mood. Exercise and stress management also help lessen the symptoms of SAD. The practice of regular aerobic exercise even more effective when done outside, may be useful since exercise reduces the accumulation of stress and targets depression.

Often following on the heels of the winter blues is the fallout from the holidays, aka, post-holiday depression. As a psychotherapist, I do notice changes in my clients this time of year. The added pressures of the holidays result in increased stress-levels and problems with time management.

Unfortunately, the stress seems to be greater for my lesbian and gay clients as they encounter varying hurdles of homophobia in their families, cultures, and daily lives. Remember, the holidays are a time for the family to reconnect and celebrate heavily time-honored traditions. Because our primary relationships as lesbian and gay people are viewed as non-traditional, this can be challenging for our traditional families. Much progress has been made, times have changed, but many of our families lag behind.

Those of us in relationships may experience a lack of validation and support when we go home because our relationships are viewed as less valid due to not being legally married. Or the other subtle signs of homophobia become evident when our partner is omitted during introductions or referred to as a "friend" to others outside the family. Moments like these can be de-valuing and place added strain on our relationships.

Some of us may be estranged from our families because of our orientation and not be welcomed home for the holidays. This pain will most likely intensify this time of year as one is prone to feel less-than, invisible and excluded.

If single and longing for companionship, maybe the holidays made you even more aware of your loneliness and the wish to be partnered. Often, our supportive network of friends tend to scatter during this season of travel to reunite with their own families, which makes them mostly unavailable.

Now that the holidays are over, we need to put them peacefully behind us. Left unprocessed, we might find ourselves corroding in some way, like the cars we see covered in salt after an ice storm. The residue cannot be healthy. Reflect upon unpleasant situations, encounters and disappointments. Share your feelings with a trusted friend. Having someone listen and validate your feelings will help you begin the healing process from these wounds.

Another therapeutic tool is expressive writing. Think about drafting a letter to the person(s) to whom your issues are still left unresolved. Keep in mind that your letter need not be sent, nor be a perfect masterpiece. This will help keep you from holding back further freeing up your emotional baggage. Research shows being able to put experiences into words is good for your physical health.

Finally, not a lot happens these next few months and maybe this is a benefit for all of us. The cold weather brings us inside. It is a time when we can reconnect with ourselves after being with others. Do things which promote peace, rest, and rejuvenation. Enjoy the activities we often find ourselves neglecting the other parts of the year. Slow down. Soak in the tub instead of rushing through a shower. Have afternoon tea, hot chocolate or both! Put your lounge-around clothes on and cozy up to a terrific book. Take up a new or old hobby. Make some delicious soups to sip in front of your fire.

Winter presents the perfect time to rent movies you missed at the box office before having your date with Oscar come March. There are so many possibilities.

So, have wonderful "snow days" spending time with yourself and those close to you. You just might change your mind about winter. I have. ▼

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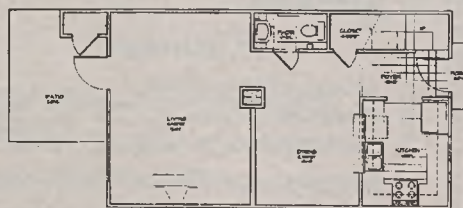
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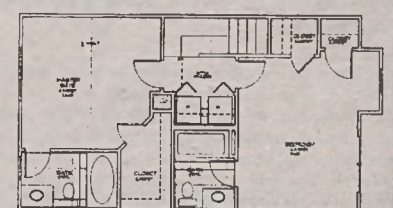
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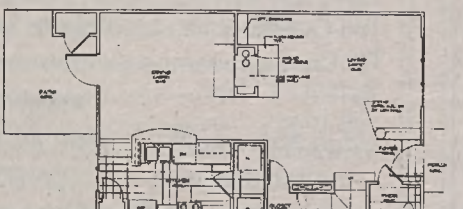


ELEVATION A

FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR

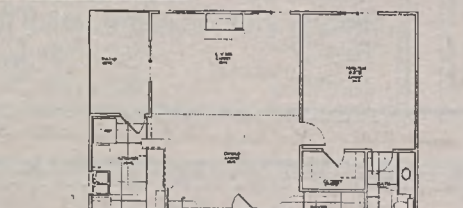


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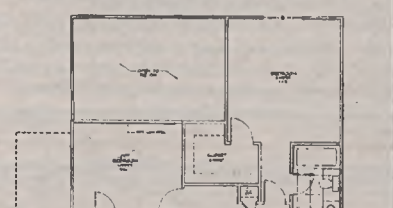


SECOND FLOOR



ELEVATION C

FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR

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