

BLUE YULE

■ Winter break can create substantial stress for students, but there are ways to cope

By Anne Le Chevallier
Oregon Daily Emerald

There are four days until fall term is officially over. But just because it's the end of the term doesn't always mean it's the end of stress for students, said Dr. Ron Miyaguchi, the University senior staff therapist.

Moving home, starting new jobs and transitioning into different environments can amplify feelings of stress and exhaustion, Miyaguchi said.

"It takes me a couple of days to feel adjusted or back in the groove. Take it easy for the first day or so," he advised.

A short break, however, may not completely relieve tensions. Whether stress is caused by family gatherings, religious and cultural activities or self-imposed expectations, it can accumulate during the month-long break, he said. Miyaguchi said he has observed three types of holiday stressors in staff and students.

The first type — social loss — involves feeling alone during the holidays because of the absence of a loved one.

A second type arises from staff and students' priorities getting out of proportion. This can cause significant emotional trauma, he said. Stress can come from focusing on gifts or trying to create the "perfect" holiday.

"They focus on doing, rather than being," he said.

The third stressor comes from overemphasizing expectations. When students feel as if they are carrying all the burdens, renew old grudges or want or demand for others to change, their physical and mental health can suffer.

Miyaguchi suggested students suffering from stress should recognize limitations, practice assertiveness, share responsibility, rely on resources and find time for self-renewal.

Weighty issues

Another source of guilt and anxiety can be food. According to Dr. William Conner, a professor at the Oregon Health Sciences University School of Medicine, Americans gain an average of about eight pounds during the holidays.

To avoid weight gain, Conner suggested people use low-fat holiday recipes, eat smaller portions, use small plates to help regulate food portions and exercise regularly.

However, this can be difficult, since many holiday celebrations and family gatherings center around sugary delights and hearty, calorie-heavy meals. Miyaguchi said he recognized the difficulty of avoiding the seasonal emphasis on food, and suggested students clarify and reevaluate their expectations.

"Give yourself some permission to indulge a little more if that is important to you, but it should be an intentional decision rather than a reaction to the situation," he said.

Long-term depression

Clinical depression can also exacerbate the winter-break blues.

For those suffering from serious depression, the holidays can intensify emotions because they lead to social comparisons, Miyaguchi said. A depressed person might expect to have a great time during break but then not feel any better.

Some people who get depressed during the winter may have Seasonal Affective Disorder, Miyaguchi said, though that involves more than just feeling sad during the winter. It is actually a type of depression marked by a pattern of sluggishness and a lack of appetite or motivation over several winters, he said.

Miyaguchi recommended that students who are tired of "coping" and want long-term change should enroll in a seminar called "Life Skills: Stress Management and Self-esteem Enhancement." The class, led by Counseling Center graduate teaching fellow Krista Gragg and psychology intern Ryan Scott, is open to all students.

Gragg said the small, three-credit class is for anyone who wants to learn strategies to successfully cope with stress, improve their relationships, achieve balance in their lives and learn more about themselves. Discussion topics include relationships, intimacy, spirituality, exercise, nutrition and family and time management.

"Over 10 weeks, they can really make substantial changes in their lives," Gragg said.

Emerald features reporter Anne Le Chevallier can be reached at annelechevallier@dailyemerald.com.

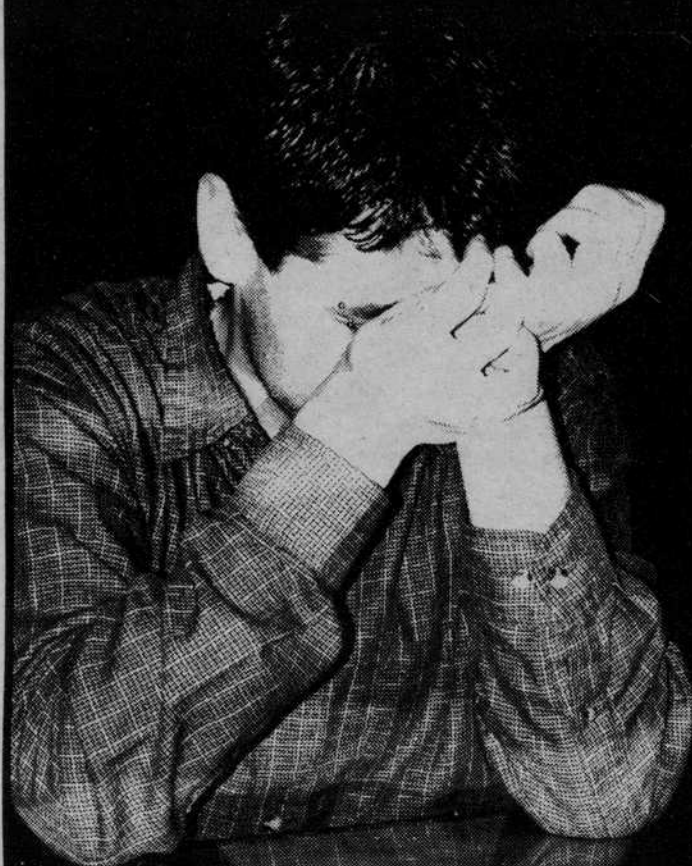


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