



# reCAPS

**Counseling & Psychological Services**  
**University of California, Santa Cruz**

## Coping With the Holiday Blues

Holidays bring joy and happiness for some, but for others, they serve as a trigger for anxiety, stress, and depression. When people are separated from family and friends during the holidays, they may feel lonely and sad. Others may not have good relationships with family, which can make holiday visits and events difficult or bring up bad memories of past holidays that were less than happy. Still

others may have financial problems that make the holidays more stressful.

Even if the holidays are a mostly happy time for you, they can still bring some stress. It's helpful to have coping tools to feel balanced, safe, and healthy when holiday stress comes along. Below are tips to address some of the more common holiday stressors.

One way to fight loneliness over the holidays is to connect with a friend—do something fun together, or if friends and loved ones are far away, plan a Skype date or phone call. If you've got spiritual or religious beliefs, observing the practices that have meaning for you or attending services can raise your spirits. You can also spend some time reconnecting with yourself by

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### All About CAPS

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers FREE, confidential mental health services to registered UCSC students all year 'round:

- Brief individual, couples' and group counseling
- Awesome workshops and trainings around campus
- Referrals to on- and off-campus resources
- Crisis services (in person Mon-Fri 8 am-5 pm; by phone 24/7 at 831-459-2628)

To make an appointment, call us at 831-459-2628 or stop by (Student Health Center, East Wing, 2nd floor) weekdays between 8 am and 5 pm. To learn more, check out the [CAPS blog](#), visit our [website](#) and like us on [Facebook](#)!

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writing in a journal or on a blog.

Another great way to combat loneliness is being of service—volunteer! Giving to others serves as a reminder of your own blessings and can provide a sense of connection and meaning.

In coping with financial stressors, try to remember the true meaning of the holidays. Sometimes we get caught up with thinking we must buy expensive gifts. Try

creating a budget and sticking to it. You could also allow your creative juices to flow in making free or low-cost gifts for loved ones, such as artwork, poems, home-made treats, or “coupons” redeemable for you doing a chore or organizing an outing.

Around the holidays (or really any time), people may rush around taking care of business or of others and forget that they need to eat, sleep, rest, and play. Prioritize your health and well being when possible, especially sleep, exer-

cise, and healthy eating. If you are running on empty, it’s much harder to cope with stress.

Family visits can be fun or stressful—or both! If your family’s holiday gatherings typically involve a lot of conflict and chaos, consider limiting the time you spend at them or making alternative plans. You could also bring a supportive friend along if this will help you to deal with family difficulties. If you are at a stressful family gathering, it’s OK to take a few minutes alone

to calm down and center yourself. If you need an excuse, say you need to use the bathroom, have to make a phone call, or have a headache and need to take a nap.

*For more helpful hints, check out this PsychCentral article: [http://psychcentral.com/lib/ beating-the-holiday-blues/000390](http://psychcentral.com/lib/beating-the-holiday-blues/000390) and this article from the Mayo Clinic: [http://www.mayoclinic.org/ healthy-living/stress-management/in-depth/ stress/art-20047544? pg=1](http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20047544?pg=1).*

## Dear CAPS,

*Someone close to me died in the past, and the holidays always bring up difficult memories and feelings. What’s wrong with me?*

—*Guilty for Grieving*

Unfortunately, the experience you’re describing is not uncommon. When we’ve lost a loved one, holidays, birthdays, anniversaries of the person’s death, and other important dates can be challenging. So, first of all, know that feeling this way doesn’t mean something is wrong with you.

Grief feelings coming up on special occasions can make it feel like you’re grieving all over again. There is no “right way” to deal with the grieving process. However, there are

a few things you can do to cope.

One way to help manage your feelings over the holidays is to acknowledge your emotions. Don’t pretend you aren’t feeling what you feel. Express your feelings to someone you trust, maybe even someone who also knew your loved one. Or, spend a little time writing your feelings down in a journal, in a poem, or perhaps in a letter to the person who died. The key is to find some balance—don’t allow yourself to dwell on sad feelings 24/7. You need to find ways to distract your mind sometimes while expressing and sitting with your feelings other times.

Something that can help when feelings of grief resurface is to do something to commemorate your loved one. Share a special memory of that person with other loved ones, light a

candle at your church, make a meal the person loved and enjoy it with others, go to a special place you and your loved one used to visit, or write or draw something that honors the person you lost.

It’s also important to find a balance between doing “the usual” things you’d be doing this time of year and giving yourself a break when you need to. Don’t isolate yourself from others, but don’t push yourself to attend every event and be social to the degree that it’s exhausting.

Finally, remember that grieving takes time, and it may take more or less time for different people. Don’t beat yourself up for your feelings, and don’t assume that a resurgence of grief at the holidays means that you haven’t made progress in your grieving process.

## The Power of the Pooch for Less Stress

Lots of people love animals. Time with them can be a great stress reducer: Research has suggested that interacting with animals can increase oxytocin (a brain chemical related to bonding) and dopamine (a brain chemical related to happiness) while lowering cortisol (a steroid hormone released by the adrenal glands during stress). Petting an animal can lower feelings of stress and blood pressure and improve feelings of wellbeing.

However, since pets other than service animals aren't allowed

on campus, how can a stressed student get some animal time? If you live off campus, maybe your landlord allows pets. However, if you live on campus or have a rental that does not permit animals, here are some other ways you can reap the rewards of time with animals.

1. Attend a campus dog therapy event. Pause for Paws is coming up this Sunday and Monday (see below).
2. Plan Skype dates with family to see your pet back home.
3. Volunteer at an animal shelter. Try the

Santa Cruz County shelter:  
<http://www.scanimalshelter.org/volunteer> or search online for other volunteer gigs.

4. Visit a dog park and befriend one of the pooch owners.
5. Watch cute animal videos.



## Upcoming Events

**PAUSE FOR PAWS:** The University Library is once again offering its popular dog therapy event to give stressed-out students some quality time with canines. There will be two opportunities for dog-petting time during finals: Sunday, Dec. 14th, on the McHenry Library lawn, 2-3 pm, and Monday, Dec. 15th at the Science and Engineering Library, 6:30-7:30 pm.

### **CAPS GROUPS FOR WINTER QUARTER:**

CAPS offers a variety of support and therapy groups every fall, winter, and spring quarter. Groups are a great way to work on issues, get support, learn, and grow.

Groups address topics like stress, depression, gender and sexuality, and more. Some are "drop in" (no appointment or commitment needed), and others require a short screening appointment and committing to attending all quarter. Call CAPS to learn more about groups and/or express your interest in a group for winter quarter at 831-459-2628 during business hours (Mon-Fri, 8 am-5 pm).

## Top Tips for Exam Day

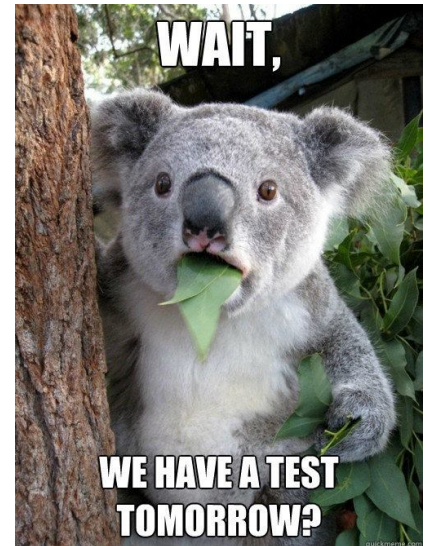
Most people don't love exams. They can be stressful, but with a little preparation, you can give yourself the best chance possible to do well. Here are CAPS' top tips for exam day:

1. Be awake and alert—get a good night's sleep the night before. (Of course, this means you have prepared by studying ahead of time and not staying up all night cramming!)
2. Eat a small but nutritious breakfast. According to nutritionists, a combination of complex carbs (e.g., whole grain toast) and protein (e.g., milk, nuts, cheese, yogurt, soy, eggs, peanut butter) can give you the energy you need to focus.
3. Get to the exam site a little early but not too early—10 minutes is perfect to ensure you're not stressed over being late but don't have to sit and worry for too long.
4. Avoid talking to stressed-out/stressful people before the exam. Listening to someone freak out is not going to help you! Wear headphones if it allows you to avoid getting stuck in a pre-exam freak-out session with an anxious classmate.
5. Bring exam aids if allowed (e.g., calculator, notes); bring other stuff you might need, like an extra pen or pencil, tissues, cough drops or water.
6. Use the restroom before the exam to minimize distractions.
7. Visualize yourself doing great on the exam. Imagining a good outcome can actually improve your performance and confidence.
8. Be aware of the time allotted for the exam and pace yourself accordingly. Make sure to read all instructions and questions ahead of time.

Kick some exam butt, Slugs!

### Contact CAPS:

Student Health Center,  
East Wing, 2nd Floor  
Phone: 831-459-2628  
(24/7 crisis help)  
<http://caps.ucsc.edu>



## WHO'S NEW AT CAPS?

CAPS is pleased to welcome Dr. Melody Fo to our staff as a clinical psychologist with a behavioral health (primary care) focus. She comes to CAPS having worked in similar roles at the student health and counseling center at our sister campus, UC Davis. She also has worked at the University of Hawaii counseling center and the Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu. The psychologist with a behavioral health focus is a new position designed to coordinate our medical and mental health services to better serve our students. Melody's office is located within the primary care area of the Cowell Student Health Center, the complex that also includes our main CAPS office, the pharmacy, and SHOP. Welcome, Melody!

