

The Holiday Blues

Although the holidays are supposed to be a time of joy and good cheer, many people who struggle with mental health issues during the holidays are easily overwhelmed. Planning family events, worrying about what you can and cannot afford to spend on gifts, being forced to attend or host holiday get-togethers, etc., are too much to handle. As a young boy and even as a teenager I couldn't understand why some years during the holidays, especially Christmas, I was sad and unhappy. According to a survey taken by National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), approximately 24% of people with a diagnosed mental illness find that the holidays exacerbate mental health issues.

The holidays are times spent with those you love, plenty of food and gift giving, correct ? Maybe in the real world, however, when you take a step back, you begin to understand why so many people experience more symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression during the winter holidays. In many cases, people feel extreme loneliness. Don't have a large gathering for the holidays if you're not up to it. There is both cultural and social pressure to be joyous, happy, and cheerful among large groups of people this time of year. For some, this can be a very difficult time. Also, people sometimes may have anxiety about coming into contact with family members that they do not have healthy relationships with, which can be uncomfortable. Just remember you are not required to put yourself into situations that cause you stress. If you know a person who has caused you harm in the past will be present at a certain event, you can avoid that event, altogether. How other people interpret your absence is not important and is secondary to your own mental health. You may, also, feel stressed, sad, or anxious because your holiday plans may look different during the COVID - 19 Pandemic. I think we need to give ourselves permission to " just be ourselves" and not to feel the need to be perfect. In so many ways the holidays can throw you into a tailspin.

Seasonal Affective Disorder is real. From personal experience, I understand the effects of SAD all too well. For many years I lived in New England and as the winter months arrived and the days shortened with decreasing daylight, I definitely felt a difference in my attitude with the lack of sunlight. So, you see, a lack of sufficient sunlight coupled with holiday pressures, stress, and anxiety can be a recipe for disaster or as some say, a perfect storm is "a brewing." My sleeping cycles were interrupted when the clocks were turned back in November, but in the spring when the clocks were moved forward to daylight savings time I felt re-energized.. Light therapy has been shown to be effective in treating depression. Experts believe that utilizing a light box, which artificially simulates sunlight, helps those with mood disorders. Where sunlight is limited in some parts of the globe, getting out for a walk in the morning when the sun is out for as little as 10 minutes can be helpful and make a difference. Research shows that sunlight boosts serotonin in the morning and is converted to melatonin which helps you to sleep at night.

Who would have ever thought several years ago we would be talking about how a pandemic would change our lives for many years to come? The holidays in particular are a prime example of how Covid - 19 has changed the jolly times of the winter holidays. We are more prepared this season to deal with protecting our friends, families, and others during large gatherings during the holiday seasons. Although there are various opinions on how we should handle gatherings, which at times can be politicized, my advice is that individuals choose what they feel most comfortable with , concerning gatherings during the holidays.

In conclusion, I can't impress upon you enough to care for yourself especially during a season full of socializing, gift giving, and traveling . You're not alone if you find yourself feeling down during this season. DO NOT hesitate to talk to a trusted family member or close friend or, even better, your therapist, if you have any concerns about your thoughts and feelings. Please have a safe and pleasant holiday.

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