

## Mental Illness: Coping with the Holidays

The holiday season is supposed to be a time full of joy, parties and gatherings with friends and families. But the holidays can be a difficult time for many persons dealing with

- ✓ personal grief,
- ✓ loneliness,
- ✓ illnesses of all kinds,
- ✓ economic concerns,
- ✓ separation from family members and
- ✓ relationship issues like separation or divorce.

We talk about peace on earth but live with the threat of terrorism and the reality that our country is at war.

The commercialization of the holiday season bombards us with unrealistic expectations. And many of us feel overwhelmed when our “to-do” list goes on forever!

While some people experience temporary periods of depression like the “holiday blues” or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), many of us live with mental illness every day.

The holidays are especially difficult when our own feelings of sadness, loneliness, depression and anxiety are the opposite of the “Hallmark” images we see all around us.

## Tips for Persons Living with a Mental Illness

The holidays can be times of stress for everyone. As a person who lives with a mental illness, I have learned the importance of self-care...especially during times of stress in our lives. Try as much as possible to maintain your routines like sleeping, regular meals, exercising, taking medication, keeping appointments with mental health professionals and attending support groups.

During this time we may find ourselves at extended family gatherings or at parties with people who do not understand about our illness. Some people may be uncomfortable and not know what to say to you. Others may say hurtful things or offer cliché’ advice out of ignorance and the stigma of mental illness. It is helpful to prepare yourself by knowing who may be at a gathering. Large groups can feel overwhelming at any time!

Know that whatever you are feeling,  
it is right for you.

It is all right to excuse yourself for some time away. There may be times when you may want to excuse yourself and go to a quiet place.

While continually isolating yourself is not helpful, there are times when solitude can be a time of replenishment, reconnection with yourself and deeply satisfying.

On the other hand, for some people it is hard to feel down when you are helping someone

else. There are many opportunities to volunteer during the holiday season. The satisfaction of giving to others can help you put your own problems in perspective.

Live in the now! Try to let go of past regrets and experiences and find joy in the present moment. And remember, laughter is good medicine!

## Tips for Family and Friends

Family and friends can include their loved one in holiday activities to the degree that he or she is able to participate. Setting specific times for family traditions like baking special food, decorating the house, wrapping gifts or attending community celebrations, gives the person something to look forward to.

If there is to be a large gathering of family and friends, plan ahead by preparing those persons who may not know the situation. This is a wonderful opportunity to help erase the stigma and shame too often associated with mental illness. You can help them find ways to be relaxed yet respectful of any special needs. Someone living with a mental illness can feel further disconnected from others if people ignore or avoid them.

Set realistic goals and be flexible. The holidays are about love and caring one another. We would all do better to let go of the image of the “perfect” holiday and focus on accepting ourselves and our loved ones without judging, criticizing or advising.

## Tips for Communities of Faith

Many of the holidays are also Holy days. For anyone who is struggling, hearing the familiar stories of our faith, singing familiar hymns and participating in religious rituals can bring comfort. It can be time of re-connecting with our faith and spirituality. Clergy can make a special effort to encourage families to invite their loved one to be part of special services.

The holidays are a time of bringing people together in community. We know that one in four families sitting in the pews is living with someone who has a mental illness. Many are suffering in silence and are afraid to share their pain with others. Incorporating mental illness in sermons, prayers and liturgies is one step in reminding them that they are not alone.

The holidays remind us that our God welcomes the stranger and the outcast and loves us just as we are.

Clergy can encourage their congregation to make an intentional outreach to persons outside the faith community. Interfaith groups and many community based mental health programs can provide you with the names of persons who would like to attend a holiday worship service in their faith tradition. Members of your congregation can offer to provide rides to persons who do not regularly attend worship.

Encourage individuals and groups to visit persons you know may be struggling with depression or other mood disorder in their home, residential settings or hospital. Bringing a small token from the faith community can help people feel they are not forgotten.

## Celebrate the Moment

Despite our good intentions, remember that the holidays rarely turn out as planned. Focus on making them a special time for you and your family, no matter what the circumstances. Celebrate this season of hope and expectation. Celebrate the many blessings in your life.

Rev. Susan Gregg-Schroeder  
Coordinator of Mental Health Ministries

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### For More Information on Mental Illness

DBSA: Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance  
[www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)

Mental Health America  
[www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)

Mental Health Ministries  
[www.MentalHealthMinistries.net](http://www.MentalHealthMinistries.net)

NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

Pathways to Promise  
[www.Pathways2Promise.org](http://www.Pathways2Promise.org)

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