

Holiday Mental Health

In the 2003 holiday movie classic, “Elf,” the main character, Buddy, shares a particular fondness for the holiday season, “The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear!” No matter what traditions you celebrate this winter, not everyone shares Buddy’s enthusiasm for this season. While the holidays can be a time of celebration and joy for many, it also can be a period of stress, sadness, and loneliness for others—and sometimes can be particularly difficult for people living with mental health and substance use conditions.

A survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) found that 64 percent of individuals living with a mental illness reported that their conditions worsened around the holidays. Whether due to separation from loved ones, personal grief, the pressures of gift-giving, economic hardship, challenging interactions with family members, or shorter days, this time of year can bring unique behavioral health challenges.

As we approach the holiday season, it is important to remember that it is very common to feel added stress – and this stress can worsen symptoms of a mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety, or a substance use disorder. However, there are ways to help address the stress or condition and improve your mental health. Below are strategies to help you find moments of joy amidst the hustle and bustle this holiday season.

Pay attention to your feelings

Remember that it is okay to feel unhappy during the holidays. Recognizing your feelings is the first step to addressing and nurturing them.

Develop a plan for when you are feeling stressed, sad, or lonely

This plan may include calling a friend or family member, going for a walk, engaging in an activity that brings joy, or watching a favorite movie. Having a plan ahead of time can help ensure the difficult moments are more manageable.

Practice self-care

It is important to schedule time for yourself and activities that recharge your mind and body. This may include reading a good book, working out, spending time in nature, and practicing stress management skills, such as deep breathing, meditation, and mindfulness. It is also important to remember to prioritize necessities, including eating a balanced diet, getting plenty of sleep, and finding time for exercise.

Connect with community

If you can’t be near loved ones during the holidays, finding a supportive community through clubs, support groups, community centers, local meetups, and faith communities can help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. Consider scheduling a regular phone call with family and friends as well.

Support others

During this time of year feelings of grief and loss can amplify. Check in on loved ones who may be alone or struggling during the holiday season. Helping a friend or neighbor not only gives joy to others, but it can improve your own happiness and well-being.

Recognize seasonal mood changes

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a condition in which people experience symptoms of depression that are triggered by the change in seasons as the days get shorter. While this form of depression often improves in the spring and summer, it is important to talk with your health care provider if you feel you are experiencing these symptoms. Treatment is effective and may include light therapy, antidepressant medication, and/or talk therapy.

Avoid alcohol and drugs

For people in recovery, the holiday season presents challenges that can trigger the use of alcohol and drugs. Having a plan for navigating social events and feelings of loneliness, can reduce the risk of substance use. For family and friends, it is important to check in on those who may be struggling with substance use over the holidays.

Know when to seek help

If you feel that your mental health struggles are becoming overwhelming and difficult to handle, it is important to seek help and know that treatment is available. Below are free and confidential resources that can connect you with effective treatment and support.

**DID YOU KNOW YOUR EAP, ULLIANCE, OFFERS
LEGAL & FINANCIAL ADVICE?**

*Life can be hard. Talking is easy.
Contact us; we're here to help! -*

800.448.8326

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