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 we live with conflict, loss, and stress. 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 blue or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), many live with mental illness every day. A NAMI National Study showed that 64% of people with mental illness report that the holidays make their conditions worse.

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.

Faith leaders can encourage their congregations 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.

For More Information on Mental Illness:
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
www.nami.org

NAMI-Santa Clara County
www.namisantaclara.org
Tips for Persons Living with a Mental Illness

- **Accept your needs.** Be kind to yourself. Put your own mental and physical well-being first. Recognize what your triggers are. Maybe shopping for gifts is too stressful or being in large parties. Become aware of what holiday activities make you feel mentally or physically agitated. Take steps to avoid or cope with these stressors.

- **Write a gratitude list and offer thanks.** Gratitude has been shown to improve mental health, helping people sleep better, lower stress, and even improve interpersonal relationships.

- **Manage your time and don’t try to do too much.** Prioritize activities that make you feel good.

- **Be realistic.** We all have struggles and sometimes it’s not possible to find the perfect gift or have a peaceful time with family. Remember that those happy people in the holiday commercials are fictional.

- **Set boundaries.** Family dynamics can be complex. Acknowledge them and accept that you can only control your role. If you need to, find ways to limit your exposure.

- **Practice relaxation.** Deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation are good ways to calm yourself.

- **Exercise daily.** Remember that exercise produces stress-relieving hormones in your body.

- **Get enough sleep.** Symptoms of some mental health conditions can be triggered by getting too little sleep.

- **Spend time in nature.** Studies show that time in nature reduces stress.

- **Practice random acts of kindness.** By volunteering or simply being intentional about being kind to other people, you can feel less lonely/isolated and more connected. The satisfaction of giving to others can put your own problems in perspective. Find one way each day to lift another person’s spirits—with things like a card, email, or phone call; by complimenting someone on how they do their job; by sharing food.

Tips for Family and Friends

Family and friends can include loved ones in holiday activities to the degree that they are able to participate. Setting specific times for family traditions like baking special food, decorating the house, wrapping gifts or attending community celebrations, gives people 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 loving and caring for 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. 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 Communities of Faith

Many of the holidays are also Holy days. For anyone who is struggling, hearing the familiar stories of faith, singing familiar hymns and participating in religious rituals can bring comfort. It can be time of reconnecting with our faith and spirituality. Faith leaders 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.