

It May Not Be The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year For Everyone



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Every year the holidays can be a joyous time of reflection, family gatherings, gifts, and revelry; however, for many of us they can be anything but jolly.

For some, the holidays remind us of loved ones not present. Others may have challenging family relationships and experience anxiety as a result. Perhaps this time of year gives us an excuse for us to overindulge in food, alcohol, or other addictive substances. Many of us are strapped for cash and it might make gift giving tough. The reasons are as numerous as they are personal. Grief, anxiety, troubled relationships, and addictive behaviors can be triggered by the holidays and send us into a spiral of depressive thoughts, or even the contemplation of self-harm.

Let me be clear, the latter is an extreme example. Despite many articles on the subject and popular belief, the holiday season does not result in a higher rate of suicide. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's data on suicides dispels this myth for our country and even shows us that December has the lowest number of suicides of the year. Still, it can be a rough time for many of us for a myriad of reasons from long, dark, cold days to tense family gatherings.

As much as society can pressure us, we don't have to keep calm and carry on. The angst many of us feel is real, so what can we do to combat negative feelings during the holiday season? Maybe we can reach out to our support groups – positive family members, supportive friends, and confidants. We can keep our habits in check and set limits on holiday spending. Truly, your friends want you to be present and happy in their lives more than they want an expensive gift. More importantly, we should be gentle with ourselves when our best intentions don't go to plan.

We can try to make more time for ourselves. Don't give up your exercise routine. If you don't have one, daily gentle walks have been shown to have a positive effect on both your mental and physical health. Give yourself permission to limit stress by politely declining a few holiday gatherings. You don't have to overextend yourself to please

everyone, and, for those of us who are enduring addiction, the last thing you want to do is backslide over the holidays. Alcohol consumption is the greatest in the month of December, particularly between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day. It plays an important role in depression and suicidal ideation and can exacerbate depressive feelings. Alcohol has been involved in 29 percent of suicides.

Other things you can do: Keep a loving eye on your friends, neighbors and family members who face emotional challenges. Remember those who have lost loved ones this year. Check in on those who struggle. Put yourself in their shoes and do what you can to help them through challenging times. Perhaps you yourself are experiencing holiday depression or contemplating self-harm. Please, call for help. A number of resources are available to help you. All you must do is ask your provider, counselor, pastor, psychologist, or call the hotlines listed below:

Suicide Hotline: 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

Crisis Line: 1-844-HELP4WV

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988

Don't go down the road of depression alone, and don't let those you love travel that dark path by themselves either.

— *Dr. Steven Eshenaur, D.O., M.B.A., is the executive director and health officer of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department.*

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