

Preparing for the Holiday Season as Part of Recovery



The holiday season can be a time of joy and happiness, but for some it also can be a time of stress and sadness. Understanding how the holidays affects our well-being is crucial in navigating the mixed emotions, feelings and memories the holidays can usher in. For those of us suffering from and recovering from mental illness, the holidays may bring added stress and potential relapse, unless we prepare and be proactive in taking care of ourselves. Being proactive can help us channel the stress of the holidays into sowing a seed of recovery.

For some, the holidays can be a depressing time. Feelings of sadness, loneliness and anger can intensify when contrasted with the joy expected of the holidays.

Factors that can contribute to holiday depression include:

- Associating the holidays with unresolved family issues or a painful childhood experience
 - Having an expectation that you "should" feel happy
 - Facing the loss of a loved one with whom you have shared the holidays
 - Having unrealistic expectations of family and friends
 - Being away from family and friends; feeling isolated from others
 - Reflecting on losses or disappointments over the past year
 - Coping with changes in family obligations or disruptions of traditions due to recent marriages, remarriages, divorce or death
 - Drinking more alcohol, a depressant, which is more available during the holidays



Keep these numbers handy!

- MHMR iCARE Crisis Hotline: 817-335-3022
- MHMR information, referrals: 817-335-3022
- Mental Health America peer support: 817-335-5405
- MHMR Tarrant Community Center: 817-332-5873
- Depression Connection: 817-810-9599





Tips for preparing for the season

1. **Recognize your emotions.** If someone close to you has recently passed away or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
2. **Build Supports.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events such as NAMI, Community Center groups and activities, Depression Connection groups, or WRAP Recovery Classes. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.
3. **Be realistic.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.
4. **Set aside differences.** Accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.
5. **Be mindful of your budget.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Stick to your budget. Another option to care for others during the holidays is just helping them out or just spending time with them.
6. **Prepare.** Try to set specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make your shopping list. That'll help prevent last-minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients. And make sure to line up help for party prep and cleanup.
7. **Work your recovery.** Be sure to follow your medical professional's treatment interventions such as taking medications as prescribed and keep all scheduled appointments. The tendency to miss appointments is tempting around the holidays, but your recovery depends on your consistent performance and follows through with treatment.
8. **Don't be afraid to say no.** Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling angry and overwhelmed. Friends and colleagues will understand if you can't participate in every project or activity.
9. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity. Be aware that alcohol use may worsen depression.
10. **Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.