

Holiday Tips for Families Affected by Mental Illness

Introduction

The holiday season is a busy time for most. There is so much to do, attend and plan, which can bring up feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious, stressed, and depressed. Maintaining mental health over the holidays can be a real challenge for individuals affected by their loved one's mental illness or who experiencing mental illness themselves. Mental illness during the holidays can affect anyone at any age. Sometimes, these feelings are triggered by a specific event or life experiences. Thankfully, there are many strategies we can use to make the holidays go smoother for everyone – ourselves and our family members.

How to Manage Stress During the Holidays

During the holidays self-care often takes a backseat. But your health comes first. Make time to take care of yourself. The holidays can be a stressful and anxious time for the entire family. Make sure that you are eating, sleeping and enjoying the holidays as well. Maintain healthy boundaries. Take time when you need it, don't feel guilty saying no when you need to. Do what is best for you and your family.

Avoid feeling guilty and identify what you really want to do.

Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. During the holiday season, many of us want to be many things to our family members. And we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. So we put pressure on ourselves along with a hefty side of stress-inducing guilt.

Remind yourself that pleasing everyone is unrealistic. Set aside the guilt, push the pause button or throw it out completely, and identify what you would like for the holidays. For instance, you might want to spend the entire day with your family or just go for dessert. Being with your family is a choice instead of an obligation.

Keep connected.

If you aren't feeling mentally well, you might be tempted to isolate yourself. But this can add to your stress too. If you're not in the holiday mood, consider spending

time with a friend (try by zoom) or calling a person who cares about you. Connecting with just one person can make you far less likely to get depressed.

Set Boundaries with your family members and communicate them.

Healthy boundaries let people know how to treat you and what you need. They help create respectful, mutual relationships because expectations are clear. The biggest boundary problems occur when you put someone else's needs before your own and allow yourself to be mistreated or devalued. The holidays add some extra challenges when it comes to healthy boundaries. As you know, the holiday season means more commitments and expectations. You may find yourself stressed and your normal routines can be affected. Things like exercising, sleeping, healthy eating and other positive coping activities are more important than ever during the holidays.

Here are some guidelines to ensure healthy boundaries over the holidays:

1. Communicate what you want or need.
2. Say "no" without guilt.
3. Say "yes" because you want to, not out of obligation or to please others.
4. Let go of trying to control what other people eat, drink, wear, say, or do.
5. Be empowered to skip, go late, leave early, or drive your own car to holiday parties.
6. Express your feelings in an assertive and respectful way.
7. Take care of your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.
8. Spend time with supportive people..
9. Don't make excuses for yourself or anyone else.
10. Act according to your own values and beliefs.

Tune into your feelings—and be honest.

At the start or end of the day, check in with yourself. Sometimes it feels like we are on autopilot 24/7 from when we wake up. We are helping family, working, dealing with responsibilities, and we never really check in with ourselves. If we don't check in with ourselves our stresses can flow into the next day, and then the next. If we just take 5 or 10 minutes a day to slow down, ask ourselves how our day has impacted us and how we are feeling, we can reset our feelings and cope with stressors.

It is okay to feel stressed, worried or angry, and if we allow ourselves the opportunity to explore why we are feeling these emotions with curiosity, and non-judgement, we can understand ourselves better.

Supporting a Family Member Affected by Mental Illness

Supporting a family member living with mental illness during the holidays can be difficult. You may not understand why they feel or act. Some people who experience this, feel they have to do things a certain way or avoid things or situations, and this can create frustration or conflict with others. There are strategies that we can do to ease this pressure while allowing our family members to be part of the holiday celebrations.

Plan your schedule in advance.

Allow your family member the prep time to prepare for what will happen before an event, party or outing. Share with them who will be at each event, where you are going and try to answer all their questions. Discuss what situations may arise and come up with a plan that will work for all of you. Discuss and negotiate these plans with your family member.

Have realistic expectations.

Things don't need to go perfectly. For example, does it make more sense for your family member to spend one hour at the party rather than five hours? If they do not feel comfortable attending, maybe you can bring them some food and spend some one on one time later.

Communicate openly about feelings with your family member.

Discuss with them how they are feeling, or what's making them anxious. Be available throughout any outings or events so they know they can come to you for support if they need it. A little one-on-one time throughout the holidays will help you get a better sense of how your family member is feeling.

Find a quiet place and plan ahead.

Find a spot during a holiday activity or party where your family member (or you) can go for a break. Encourage your family member to give themselves permission

to leave a stressful situation. Don't try to force your family member to interact with other people if they don't want to. Let them have that time on their own to regroup. Their "strategic retreat" may be anything from walking the dog, to getting tea, to listening to soothing music, or to having a good cry. If your family member needs to decompress with a game on their phone, that's ok. Make sure to check in periodically with how they are doing, they may want to decide whether they return to the get-together or go home.

Don't worry about other people's judgements.

People can ask insensitive questions or make comments about your family member's behaviour. Sometimes its rude, other times, they're just trying to understand. Have a quick response ready that explains why your family member is acting a certain way

Encourage your family members to set boundaries for themselves.

Just as it is important to set your own boundaries, let your family member know that it is okay for them to do the same. If a family member communicates to you their boundaries, thank them for their honesty and do your best to accommodate.

Remember, it is okay to ask your family member how you can help them. Be patient—learning and practicing new coping strategies takes time. If your family member is learning new skills, offer to help them practice. Listen and offer support but avoid forcing unwanted advice.

In Summary

Setting specific times for family traditions like baking special food, decorating the house, wrapping gifts or attending community celebrations, gives the everyone something to look forward to. Set realistic goals and be flexible. The holidays are about caring and respecting one another. Its better to let go of the idea of the "perfect" holiday and focus on accepting ourselves and our loved ones without judgment or criticism.

Despite good intentions, remember that the holidays rarely turn out as planned. Focus on making them a special time for you and your family. Take stock of things that are going well, or that you have done well.

Remember, it is important to take care of yourself. If you need some extra help, try affirmations such as: "I want/need ... and that doesn't make me selfish." You are entitled to setting boundaries, having your own feelings, and not having to explain why you are saying no. And always remember that the holiday season is about hope, joy and peace.

And Happy Holidays!