



**MENTAL HEALTH AROUND
THE HOLIDAY PERIOD**

The holiday period is a time for relaxation and happiness, where people catch up with family and friends and take a rest from work.

Unfortunately, for many people the holiday period is not all about positivity and can instead have a negative impact on their mental health. This can be for a number of reasons, with different people reacting differently to the same events. Here we will outline some of the reasons why people may find the holiday period tough and what problems may arise. We will also suggest some tips that may help to reduce the impact the holidays have on your mental health.

The term holiday period can be subjective. In the UK you may see this term as referring to the days prior to Christmas until New Year's Day, whereas in the USA you may see this period as starting as early as Thanksgiving week. It also varies based on cultural and religious beliefs. Whilst for the most part we are referring to the first definition, the contents of this brochure are likely to apply to most holiday and religious celebrations throughout the year.

What about the holiday period can cause strained mental health?

There are a number of factors that are often associated with the holidays that can strain the mental health of both somebody who is already suffering and somebody who is otherwise mentally healthy. Whilst not leading to ideal scenarios and situations, these strains can often be expected and planned for, which we will discuss later in this brochure. In some cases you will need to seek professional help due to the effects these factors have had on your mental health but for the most part symptoms will subside fairly swiftly on their own. Below are some factors of the holidays that are often seen as triggers for poor mental health.

Isolation and Loneliness – For most people the holidays are a time for being with friends or family but for some people this is not possible. Whilst these people may have been lonely before the holidays, the thought of others being together is likely to exacerbate the feelings of loneliness and isolation that were already being experienced. Whilst a person may not physically witness others enjoying their time together, representations in the media will make these images hard to avoid.

Perception – The way a person perceives an event is a key factor in a number of mental health problems and this is no different during the holidays. Whilst a person may be having a nice family gathering, if they perceive others to be having a nicer time then they are likely to develop negative thoughts and moods. This is especially the case when these perceived images and thoughts are compared to what a person wants to experience themselves.

Financial Pressure – Holiday celebrations have become increasingly commercialised over the years, with this being especially true for Christmas. This leads to a lot of pressure on parents to buy their children the gifts that they desire. This can then lead parents into increasingly spending money and accruing growing debts. These debts then unsurprisingly lead to increased stress. It is also not unusual to experience a number of sales before and after the holiday period. Whilst these events can help people save money, they have also been shown to cause a number of shoppers increased anxiety and may cause people to spend more than they had intended, leading to spending guilt.





Excessive food consumption – Food consumption has become synonymous with holidays in the many parts of the globe. People often see the holidays as a time to over indulge. Unfortunately, this can have a negative effect on a person's mental health. Clearly, eating more food than required or than you usually eat can put you at risk of weight gain, especially if this happens multiple times over the holidays, and this in itself can cause people to develop negative self-images and can cause depressed moods. The rampant availability of food can also be a trigger for those people suffer from eating disorders, especially when family members may not be aware of their condition. This may also lead to conflict. Finally, studies have shown that junk food and sugary treats, which are often enjoyed at the holidays, do have links to depression. Whilst having a few treats is not going to cause any problems it is useful to be mindful of too much over indulgence during the holidays.

Alcohol – As with many celebrations, alcohol is often readily available around the holidays and is excessively consumed by many people. Along with the physical conditions this can lead to, both short and long term, the rampant availability of alcohol can have negative impacts on mental health. Not only is alcohol a trigger for those that may be fighting alcohol dependency, but it is in itself a depressant and therefore excessive consumption of alcohol can lead to low mood and behavioural alterations.

These in turn may also lead to family conflicts and unpleasant physical side effects. Much like we have mentioned in relation to junk food, moderation is key. A few drinks or a few social gatherings with alcohol are not likely to be a problem but issues can arise when excessive consumption takes place.

Bereavement – Losing a loved one can be a very traumatic and upsetting experience and the impacts of this loss can be felt year round. This is especially the case for many people around the holidays and can act as a trigger for poor mental health. This does not relate only to instances of family members passing away during the holidays but instead the holidays can exacerbate feelings of loss experienced earlier in the year.

Pressure and Stress – Many aspects of the holidays can increase the pressure or stress a person experiences. There can be events to arrange, travel to be undertaken and large meals to be cooked. These can all cause stress, which is extra stress that is added to the stress a person may already be experiencing in their lives, as the holidays do not mean other issues are suddenly resolved. This stress can often be made worse by a belief that the holidays need to be perfect as achieving perfection is often out of reach and so causes frustration and disappointment.

Sleep patterns – More and more research is showing that good sleeping patterns are vital for a person's mental wellbeing. The holidays are often times where vacations from work are taken but this does not always result in increased sleep. In fact, with social events being focused around the holidays, many people will experience a worse sleep schedule than when they are working. Whilst this may be fine for a small number of events, if a person has a holiday season full of late night functions they are likely to notice a decline in their mental well-being.

Family – Whilst the holidays are often portrayed as a time for family, it can be family that are the triggers for a person’s poor mental well-being during this time. This is unlikely to be intentional but holiday gatherings often mean family members, who may not otherwise get along, are forced to engage in social interaction for extended periods of time. This can lead to frustration and anger; especially when these gatherings are seen as non-optional and unescapable.

Many holiday gatherings take place in the original family home, where children return to the parental home for dinner. Whilst this can be a nice experience, for some returning to the family home or childhood bedroom can be a trigger of unwanted memories from their childhood that can greatly impact mental wellbeing. The break-up of a family unit can also make the holidays a difficult time, with divorces often resulting in children unable to spend time with all their family at once. Causing stress for all those involved.

What conditions may become apparent or exacerbated?

There are a number of conditions that may become apparent or which may be worsened by the holiday period. Here we will discuss a range of these conditions. It is important to remember that everybody is different and so will react differently to the experiences they have. If you see a condition here that you have, that does not mean you will automatically have a bad holiday period. Instead, it simply means that you should be mindful of any symptoms that may occur. Conditions that are not mentioned here may also experience worsening of symptoms during the holiday period. Therefore it is important for everybody to be mindful during the holidays. If you do feel that you are struggling with symptoms, or if your symptoms persist for an extended period of time then we encourage you to speak to your regular healthcare provider as soon as possible.

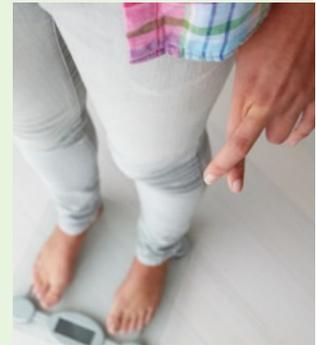
Depression, Anxiety and the Holiday Blues – The media has often put forward the idea that the holidays, especially Christmas and New Year, are the time of year where depression and suicide are at their highest. Whilst it is true that there are problems with depression during this time, it has also been found that this is not the time where depression rates peak, with some suggestions being that depression is highest in the spring time. Regardless of whether the holidays are the worst time for depression, we do know they are a difficult time where many negative feelings associated with depression are amplified.

One term that is often used to describe the temporary feelings of depression and anxiety around the holiday period is the ‘Holiday blues’. The Holiday Blues differ from many other clinical diagnoses as they are temporary, although this does not mean they should be treated any less seriously. The Holiday Blues are thought to affect a vast number of the population, with one study has found that 64% of people believe they suffer from Holiday Blues and 24% feel it greatly affects them.

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Substance and alcohol abuse – Alcohol and drug abuse are known to be one way people try to deal with feelings of loneliness which are often felt around the Christmas period. Unfortunately, this can lead to long term problems as people result to increase usage to deal with their feelings. This is the case for both people with and without a previous history of substance problems. Those with a history of these problems are also at a greater risk of relapse during the holiday period due to the increased levels of stress and the often increased availability of alcohol.

Eating disorders – As we have briefly mentioned in the previous section, the vast availability of food and the expectation of over indulgence that accompanies many holidays can lead to a worsening of eating disorder symptoms in those that are already suffering. This is often exacerbated when family members are not aware that a person is suffering as conflict can ensure. The availability of food during the holidays can also be a great catalyst for overeating and binge eating.



Seasonal Affective Disorder

One disorder we wish to highlight in more detail is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depressive disorder that occurs with a seasonal pattern, most commonly occurring in the winter months. This means that for the Northern Hemisphere, there is a high risk of an incidence of SAD coinciding with the holidays; hence the inclusion of this disorder on this brochure. It is important to remember that SAD can occur in other seasons and so can align with the Christmas period in the Southern Hemisphere, although this would be much rarer. There are a number of key details required for a diagnosis of SAD; including a reoccurrence of symptoms two years in a row, and symptoms relenting in other seasons, for instance if SAD occurs in winter then there will be no depressive symptoms in summer. It is thought that SAD is a result of seasonal changing of light or the changes in our natural circadian rhythms. The link to light variations is why one of the treatments for SAD is light therapy, with other treatments being antidepressant medication and psychotherapy, which is also the treatment for non-seasonal depression. SAD shares many of the symptoms as depression, although on a seasonal basis, including mood changes, trouble sleeping and social isolation. SAD can be thought of as a more severe form of the Holiday Blues that we previously discussed and, much like the Holiday Blues, it should be treated on a par with depression. In some cases people are unable to function in the winter months without continuous treatment and so it is important not to overlook SAD as a legitimate condition.

Worldwide estimates show that SAD is a substantial problem that unfortunately appears to affect three times as many women as men. Unsurprisingly, the nearer a person is to the equator, the less likely they are to suffer from SAD as there is more exposure to sunlight. When looking to compare the prevalence of SAD amongst nations there are some countries with a less than 1% prevalence, for example research out of Australia highlights that 1 in 300 people suffer from SAD during their winter months. This number climbs in the North American region where Canadian researchers have put prevalence estimates between 2% and 3%, whilst American researchers have found estimates nearer 5%. The UK National Health Service concurs more with the American findings, with the UK surveys suggesting a prevalence rate between 6% and 7%. It should also be noted that the risk of SAD decreases with age and so it is adolescents and young adults that are most at risk.



How can you reduce the impact the holidays have on your mental health?

There are a number of ways you can prevent the holidays having a negative effect on your mental health. Below are a selection of tips. You may find that some of these tips work for you and others don't, it is about finding what is best for you. If your symptoms continue to deteriorate or have been going on for an extended period of time then we would advise you seek professional help as soon as possible.

Medication – This only applies to those people who are already suffering with a diagnosed condition. It is important to ensure that you have the correct amount of medication for the holiday period as many pharmacy and medical facilities will likely run reduced hours over the holidays. Missing medication can cause rapid changes in mood and can also have negative physical side effects so it is important to be prepared. If you do find you do not have your medication then you will need to contact your medical provider as soon as possible to arrange for an emergency prescription.

Be open and honest about how you feel – If you are struggling with your mental health over the holiday period it can be useful to talk to a close friend or relative about how you feel. If you are unable to talk with a friend or relative then there are a number of helplines and services that will be open over the holiday period who will be happy to talk with you. You may be experiencing your first holidays without a loved one and this is likely to make you feel down. It is important to acknowledge these feelings are normal and should not be suppressed.

Exercise and eat healthily – Although the holidays are often a time for overindulgence it is important to try to not let this get out of hand. As well as having your holiday treats you should remember to still try to eat fruit and vegetables and to get exercise where possible. Not only will this provide physical benefits, research shows that exercise and healthy eating will improve your mental well-being.

Don't aim for perfection – Perfection is not something that can be achieved. Unfortunately this means when people aim for perfection they are left disappointed. To avoid this disappointment it is advisable to not aim for perfection and to learn to accept that not everything will go to plan.

Learn to say no and ask for help – Whilst you may want to please everybody and see everybody over the holidays you must remember it is ok to say no. If you always say yes to everything that is asked of you over the holiday period then you are extremely likely to become stressed, overtired and frustrated. Not only will this impact your mental well-being but it will guarantee you will not enjoy the holidays. If you are planning a big gathering then you will likely benefit not only from saying no to other requests but also from delegating tasks to split the work load amongst your friends or family. This will not only relieve the stress from you but may have the added benefit of making others feel included and valued.

Plan your time – Being behind schedule on a task often leads to a great deal of stress and tension. That is why we advise that you plan your holiday time accordingly. Whilst this does not mean you must plan every minute of every day, it does mean that bigger tasks should be planned for. Things to plan and schedule may be the buying of the food, shopping trips or cooking schedules. Doing this will be one less thing for you to be concerned with and will ensure you are not left rushing to complete everything before the holiday deadline. If you do choose to plan your daily routine, for example on days that are activity heavy, then it is important to schedule in time to relax. Remember, the holidays are usually a period of a few weeks and not a few days, so activities and social gatherings can be scheduled at more spaced intervals.

Stick to a budget – Financial pressure and overspending around the holidays is a big problem for many people. The best way to combat this is to stick to a budget that encompasses gifts, food and social gatherings. If money is tight you may choose to agree to make home-made gifts or to only buy smaller gifts with spending limits. It is also advisable to shop online, in advance to allow shipping time, as online shopping allows a more simple way of comparing prices and helps to avoid the impulsive purchases you may usually make in store. Holiday sales can also be greatly useful, as long as you remain mindful of spending limits and your budget. Food can often end up costing more than you may originally think, especially if you are cooking for a large family. To combat this you may suggest that each guest brings a dish to the meal, helping spread not only the cost of the meal but also the preparation responsibilities.

Relax or Take time away from Christmas – It is important to remember to relax and unwind amongst all the holiday stress. People relax and unwind in different ways but you may choose to go for a walk, read a book or meditate. You may also benefit from taking some time away from the holidays or Christmas to enjoy hobbies you enjoy the rest of the year round, especially if the holidays are increasing your stress levels. During extended family visits you may benefit from stepping outside for a short walk or run, especially if there are family members

that you often conflict with. This will give you both a break so that you can hopefully continue to be civil around each other for the holiday period.

Start new traditions – When a person has lost a loved one it can be very difficult for them to continue celebrating the holidays as they used to. When this is the case it can be a good idea to start a new holiday tradition to help move forward.

You may choose to do something completely new or something in memory of the one you have lost. One tradition that many people consider is volunteering around the holidays. Many charities, especially those revolving around soup kitchens and the homeless, are often thrilled to have an extra pair of hands around the holidays.



It is hoped that this brochure has highlighted some behaviours that you may wish to be mindful of over the holiday period, as well as providing some solutions to these problems. As we have said, everybody is different and will experience the holidays in their own way.

The holidays are meant to be a time for happiness and we hope that you can use these tips to try and enjoy them as much as possible.

If you would like more tips about living with mental illness then please visit our website:
www.shawmind.org



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