

HANDLING THE HOLIDAYS

Holidays tend to be especially stressful for families experiencing a mental illness.

- There are often implied, if not explicit expectations of certain types of behavior (e.g. exchanging gifts, socializing) and feelings (be happy!, etc.) that are hard to live up to.
- Large groups can be over-stimulating and confusing for individuals diagnosed with a mental illness.
- Holidays can be painful reminders of times past when things were better, thus highlighting present difficulties related to coping with a mental illness.
- Family get-togethers can raise the issue of what to tell people about the illness, the life of the individual diagnosed with a mental illness, etc.
- Holidays lend themselves to ill individuals comparing themselves unfavorably to other non-disabled or more accomplished relatives. Other family members can experience survivor's guilt.

Families can reduce holiday stress by:

1. Discussing plans in advance.
2. Acknowledging feelings related to holidays and being with family members, including any mixed feelings people may have.
3. Not making assumptions about how individuals feel or which/what kind of activities family members want to be part of.
4. Keeping expectations realistic, especially regarding whether the family member diagnosed with a mental illness can tolerate a family/social gathering, how long and what participation the person is capable of.
5. Respecting and supporting each family member's choices and decisions regarding participation in family activities/get-togethers.
6. Accepting each family member's limits, need and preferences.
7. Being flexible and allowing for some changes, when possible, in plans and participation.
8. Strategizing how to handle some of the stress: how to answer personal questions, what tasks each person will focus on, where get-togethers will be held, how long to stay at get-togethers, taking breaks, etc.

Adapted from "When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness" by Rebecca Wools

NAMI Aurora, Colorado

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is the most common cause of ill health in our society, underlying as many as 70% of all visits to family doctors. There are many ways to relieve stress. What follows is a list of some practical strategies. Some are simple and can be implemented quickly; others are a bit more involved. All are feasible and beneficial.

1. Breathe Deeply

Give yourself a 5-minute break from whatever is bothering you and focus instead on your breathing. Sit up straight, eyes closed, with a hand on your belly. Slowly inhale through your nose, feeling the breath start in your abdomen and work its way to the top of your head and then slowly exhale.

2. Regular Exercise

During times of high stress, we could benefit from an immediate physical outlet. A brisk walk, a run, or a bike ride. This often is not possible. Regular exercise can drain off ongoing stress and keep things under control. Choose things you like or they will feel like a chore to you. (Too much exercise can cause mania if you are bipolar.)

3. Be Present

Slow down. Take 5 minutes and focus on only one behavior with awareness. Notice how the air feels on your face when you're walking. Enjoy the texture and taste of each bite of food as you slowly chew. When you spend time in the moment and focus on your senses, you should feel the tension leave your body.

4. Relaxation / Meditation

Sit quietly and pet the family cat, lie on a hammock, stare at the fireplace, try Yoga. Books and relaxation tapes are readily available and can be used or a formal training course.

5. Sleep

Go to bed 30 to 60 minutes earlier. Take a "power nap" (five to 20 minutes). A nap lasting more than 30 minutes can make you feel groggy. Sleep can be key in reducing stress and helping you cope and function better. (Do not sleep during the day if you suffer from insomnia.)

6. Leisure Time

Exercise or recreation, entertainment and hobbies. The term leisure is derived from the Latin word *licere* which means "permission." The main reason people do not have enough leisure is that they are not giving themselves permission to make the time to enjoy it. Plan it.

7. Realistic Expectations

When expectations are realistic, life feels more predictable and therefore more manageable. There is an increased feeling of control because you can plan and prepare yourself. Expect less from people who cannot give you what you want. It makes it easier – not great, just less upsetting.

8. Humor

Humor is an individual thing – what is funny to one may be hurtful to another. Humor is a wonderful stress reducer, an antidote to upsets. Enjoy a funny movie, a comic strip, share a joke. Find a way to laugh about your own situations. Even if it feels forced at first, practice laughing. It does your body good.

9. Reach Out – "Ventilation"/Support System

A good social support system is one of the most important resources for dealing with stress. Talking to others – preferably face-to-face or at least on the phone – it is a great way to better manage whatever is stressing you out. Support group is here to listen, we care. "A problem shared is a problem halved." Develop a support system. Another form of ventilation you might find helpful is writing. Write a letter, not for sending, and destroy it once written – unread. The value is in expressing the feelings and getting them out. Re-reading the letter just reinforces the upset and fans the flames of anger all over again.

10. Seek Professional Help

Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.