

## **Mental Health Matters**

This year, because of a happy coincidence, Christmas and Hanukkah overlap. Christmas begins Wednesday, Dec. 25 and Epiphany Eve concludes the season on Sunday, Jan. 5. Hanukkah begins at sundown on Wednesday, Dec. 25 and lasts until sundown on Thursday, Jan. 2. How do you survive this busy time and keep your sanity? Here are some tips:

1. Remember what the holiday season is about for you. Make that your priority. This season is really about sharing, loving and time spent with family and loved ones. Develop your own meaningful family traditions that don't have to cost a lot of money. Also, remember not to take things too seriously. Fun or silly things to do, games or movies that make you laugh, playing with pets, and time alone or with a partner are all good ways to reduce stress. Use this time of year to help regain perspective.
2. Check in with your emotions. It is completely normal to be feeling a bit more emotional, this time of year – particularly with everything that is impacting our lives at home and around the world. Take some time to take stock of your emotions – whether that is sadness, anxiety, fear or loneliness – and then begin to address them in whatever way is most productive for you, such as journaling, talking to a loved one, finding an online group, or just spending some quiet time alone thinking (that isn't when you're trying to fall asleep). Researchers in the US found that people who identified their emotions and took steps to process them reported lower stress levels than those who avoided identifying their emotions. Don't try to push past or ignore them no matter how uncomfortable they may be.

3. Plan ahead, organize, delegate. If you're entertaining, use the "keep it simple" strategy. Make a list and check it twice. Decorate, cook, shop, or do whatever's on your list in advance. Rather than one person making all the preparations, invite your guest to bring a dish. Kids can help with the menu too not to mention gift-wrapping, and decorating. Then you can really relax and enjoy visiting friends, relatives and coworkers.
4. Beware of overindulgence. Having a few too many glasses of eggnog or holiday spirits can initially lift your mood but then drop you lower than before. Also, too many sweets will probably make you feel lethargic and tired. Simple things like eating well, exercising regularly and getting a good night's sleep are ways to maintain holiday peace of mind and the [winter blues](#).
5. Stay within budget. Finances can be a huge source of stress for many people, especially during the holidays, and likely this year more so than others. Try putting family members and partners' names in a hat and buy one gift for the person you draw; this can help reduce expenses and refocus energies on thoughtfulness, creativity and truly personal gifts. Encourage children to make gifts for friends and relatives so the focus is on giving rather than buying. Try to eliminate the unnecessary and stay within your budget. A call, a visit or a note to tell someone how important they are to you can be as touching as and more meaningful than a gift. You can also enjoy free activities like walking or driving around to look at holiday decorations, going window shopping, or making your own decorations or presents. Craigslist and swap events are great places to find inexpensive brand-new items, and excellent-condition used items (which is good for the environment too).

6. Connection is key. Invite others. If you have few family or friends, reach out to neighbours. Find ways to spend the holidays with other people. If you're part of a family gathering, invite someone you know is alone to your gathering. We all understand how feelings of connection and belonging are so strongly tied to our mental health. This time of year is the perfect time to reconnect with your network. Also, if you know that someone will be alone – invite them to take part. This will help you and them to feel better.
7. Remember the weather doesn't help. Some people get the **winter blues** each year, and a much smaller number (2-3%) develop **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)**. Paying attention to nutrition, exercise and sleep and being careful with alcohol are also important if you have a history of depression. If your low mood carries on into the New Year and starts to affect your daily life, you should see your family doctor. There are free skills and coaching available to help overcome low mood or mild to moderate depression. If you think you need help, during the holiday season or anytime of the year.

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