



Take Care Of Your Mental Health This Holiday Season

It's time to deck the halls and trim the trees – the holidays are in full swing. Joyful time with family and friends can often be overshadowed by unrealistic expectations and financial concerns that can have a negative impact on our mental health.

This year, add taking care of your mental health to your holiday To Do List.

According to the World Health Organization, mental wellness is defined as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

Another definition: Mental wellness includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It provides stability in how we think, feel, and act. It enables us to handle stress with good coping skills, relate to others with compassion, and use good judgment in our decision-making.

There is no health without mental health. Paying attention to our state of mind and emotions is just as important as staying physically fit.

Ann Venuto, retired psychiatric nurse practitioner and NAMI Buffalo & Erie County board member, offers suggestions on how to maintain mental wellness during the holidays.

"Focus on the real meaning behind the holidays rather than materialistic expectations," Venuto said. "If you are feeling overwhelmed, take time out for yourself doing something you enjoy such as listening to music, taking a walk outside, or reading a book."



1. Set realistic expectations for yourself:

The 2019 Bankrate Holiday Gifting Survey reports more than 6 out of 10 people feel pressure to overspend on either presents, travel, social outings or charitable donations during the holiday season. Family expectations can place a heavy burden on individuals who may struggle to afford gifts or decorations.

If you have a large family, suggest a gift exchange where each person only has to buy one gift. Or purchase the same gift for all or make a charitable donation in the person's name. At large family dinners, ask everyone to bring a dish and help with clean up.

2. Don't Rely on Drugs or Alcohol to De-Stress

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America recommends avoiding drugs and alcohol for comfort. There is a 20% overlap between people with anxiety or mood disorders and substance use disorders, and substances can intensify symptoms. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant and decreases inhibitions, which for some people, may lead to increased episodes of anger and sadness.

With holiday parties and social gatherings, individuals who have a tendency to overindulge can be at increased risk.

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3. Practice Mindfulness, a valuable mental wellness tool.

The online MSW program at the University of Southern California created a Mindfulness Toolkit featuring free Mindfulness Resources like guided meditations for beginners.

“While the holidays can be filled with holiday obligations with friends and family, this can be an often overlooked source of stress,” Karl Shallowhorn, chair, Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition and Education Program Coordinator, Community Health Center of Buffalo, Inc. said. “This is why it’s even more important at this time of year to try to carve out some time for yourself and maintain your self-care practices. Exercise, meditation and even playing with your pet can be a great way to relieve some of the holiday stress you may be experiencing.”

According to Venuto, managing a mental illness can be especially challenging during the holidays. Someone with a mental illness is more sensitive to stressors that increase anxiety or depress mood.

Financial pressures may induce feelings of failure or guilt and family dynamics at holiday gatherings may exacerbate old conflicts.

Individuals with a mental illness may experience stigma if family members are judgmental or intolerant.

“Some family members may respond with denial or shame and blame for their condition,” she said. “Some friends and relatives may mean well but lack sensitivity and say unhelpful things like ‘just snap out of it’ or ‘look on the bright side’. Someone with a serious depression cannot snap out of it and insensitive comments can increase their distress,” she said.

Be kind to yourself, know your triggers and monitor your feelings. Seek professional help if needed or reach out to support groups, attend community events or participate in religious services.

The stigma of mental illness can push that family member into isolation and increase their feelings of mistrust and

worthlessness. Venuto suggests accepting family members and friends as they are, even if they don’t live up to all your expectations.

“Be compassionate if others get upset or distressed,” Venuto said.

If a family faces these challenges, NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness), Mental Health Advocates of Western New York (MHA) and other Anti-Stigma Coalition members offer support groups, peer support and other resources on mental illness.

NAMI offers educational meetings and a free 12 week course for families on how to cope better when someone in their family has a mental illness. For more information, call 716-226-6264 or check out the website namibuffalony.org.

Visit the letstalkstigma.org/the-resources to discover programs and services that promote mental wellness. ■

Symptoms of major depressive disorder with a **Seasonal Pattern (SAD)** can become more pronounced as the holidays approach.

Manage your symptoms with these tips:

Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water and herbal teas, and don’t forget to hydrate your skin with lotions and lip balms. Hydration nourishes the brain and its physical effects can improve your overall mood.

Find time to exercise. Outdoor activities such as ice skating, hiking or skiing can be fun during the holidays. Any form of exercise will release endorphins, which can lessen the symptoms of depression.

Spend time with loved ones. Social interaction can help lessen the feelings of loneliness that may come around this time of year.

Pamper yourself. Taking a bath, having a warm drink or getting a massage can create a sense of calm and happiness, especially during the stress of the holidays.

Indulge without over consuming. Treating yourself can make you happy, but over-indulging in unhealthy food around the holidays can negatively impact symptoms.

We need your help!

Our New Year's resolution for 2019 was to have 3,500 pledge takers by the end of the year. We need fewer than 600 more! You can help us reach our goal by asking others to take the pledge to stop stigma around mental illness.

SHARE THE PLEDGE TO HELP SPREAD THE WORD:

letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS



Visit letstalkstigma.org/current-members for more information on our current members



BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge.

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at kshallowhorn@chcb.net.

A Q&A with Peers in Cayuga County

Peers in Cayuga County supports individuals with mental illness and requesting recovery-based activities that will enhance their social and practical life skills toward their becoming better community members. Services include support job support, SSI, SSDI, GED advocacy and a 24/7/365 support line. We recently spoke with **Margaret Phinney, Executive Director** about the importance of eliminating stigma.

Why is it important to address the stigma of mental illness?

As a peer run organization, it is important to us that people understand they cannot catch mental illness just by being near us, which seems the case in our community. Also, we strive to let all people know that having a mental illness does not mean you are incapable of achieving your dreams. I have had to stand up to people in different meetings to let them know I am not stupid.

Once I have presented where I came from and everything I have achieved, I earn a great deal of respect. I encourage people to be proud of who they are and let others know they have a mental health issue and it doesn't stop them from being the person they want to be. Getting people to stop stigmatizing people with mental illness in our community is extremely hard.

Why is your agency involved in reducing the stigma of mental illness?

Peers in Cayuga County is involved with reducing stigma of mental illness because we work with people who have mental illness.

Is there less stigma as a result of people sharing their stories?

Most people of means treat others as if they are less of a human being. I know this from experience from attending different meetings and functions in the community. I don't know why it is like this here, but it is and I strive to change what I can when I can. In my opinion, not enough people share their stories and stand up as proud people who happen to have an issue that involves mental health. ■



Visit our events page at

LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS

For a list of local mental Health Events in your community

ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members:

BryLin Behavioral Health System • Children's Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc.
Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service of Buffalo & Erie County
The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P. Lee Foundation
Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation