



Managing the Anxiety of the Holiday Season

The winter holiday season can be a wonderful time filled with parties and social gatherings with family and friends. Yet for some people, it can be a time filled with sadness, self-reflection, loneliness, and anxiety. The COVID pandemic has made celebrating more complicated, even as many families look forward to being together this year.

The Anti-Stigma Coalition hosted a Facebook Live event on December 15 to discuss Managing the Anxiety of the Holidays. Visit letstalkstigma.org/facebook-live to view past discussions.

Megan Andrews, LCSW-R, assistant director, mediation and employee assistance program, Child and Family Services was a panelist for the event. According to Andrews, many factors, including unrealistic expectations, changing pandemic guidelines, financial pressures, and excessive commitments

can cause stress and anxiety at holiday time. The days are getting darker and longer, and the holiday season seems longer than ever before.

"Our excitement and anticipation of the season can easily be overwhelmed by the insatiable need to do it all, be it all, and buy it all," Andrews said. "Increased stress is known to motivate us to accomplish great things, however if left unchecked, can cause us to become overwhelmed and shut down."

"Certain people may feel anxious or depressed around the winter holidays due to seasonal affective disorder (SAD), sometimes referred to as seasonal depression," she said. "Stress has an impact on our neurological system, at times making it difficult to concentrate, focus, and make decisions. It also has an

Continued on Page 2



impact on us physically, increasing headaches, contributing to excessive drinking/eating and sleep disturbances.”

Maura Kelley, director, Independent Living Center Peer Connections, lives with a mental illness, and says when she feels anxious, uptight, or sad, it is usually centered around what she calls stinking thinking.

“I often remember past unpleasant memories of the holidays,” Kelley said. “And I don’t want to be sad again because of my memories. Sometimes I just feel these feelings because I think I am trapped into being with others that I am not normally with.

“Then I think of how “should” my holiday be—thinking of that forever happy Hallmark Christmas where everything is pleasant and things are always smooth, and there are no tangible worries about money, diet, what to wear, travel, and there are beautiful romances always tied to someone getting engaged and so on. Then I have to remember that we just turned back the clocks and this is the darkest part of the year and having little light or sunshine affects us all in being down,” she said.

Kelley, was also a panelist for the Facebook Live, says she is grateful to have supportive loved ones and provides insight on how to help others who suffer with anxiety during the holidays.

“I have found for myself that when my loved ones are with me during the holidays, it is helpful to solicit my participation in the holiday. For people to give me the opportunity to help out, bring a dish, set the table, decorate the cookies and so on. When they ask me to contribute, I feel included.

“I don’t like it when family members ask me how I am doing or how I am hanging in there? I know they are trying to be supportive, but I really don’t like stopping my activity to just assess how I’m feeling because I am just trying to enjoy the moment,” she said.

Andrews offers the following suggestions to reduce this stress and enjoy special holiday celebrations:

Continued on Page 3

HOLIDAY HEALTH SUGGESTIONS

Don’t abandon healthy habits. Don’t let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt.

- Have a healthy snack before holiday meals so that you don’t go overboard on sweets, cheese, or drinks.
- Eat healthy meals.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Include regular physical activity in your daily routine
- Try deep-breathing exercises, meditation, or yoga.
- Avoid excessive tobacco, alcohol, and drug use.
- Be aware of how the information culture can produce undue stress, and adjust the time you spend reading news and social media as you see fit.

Take a breather. Make some time for yourself. Find an activity you enjoy. Take a break by yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm. Other suggestions:

- Take a walk at night and stargaze
- Listen to soothing music
- Read a book

Seek professional help if you need it. 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.

MAYO CLINIC

If you have a loved one with a mental health challenge, you will be helping others by taking care of yourself first. When you are able to manage your emotions you will be in a better position to support others. You also could take a look at your blessings and privileges and find ways to share by giving your time, talents and other gifts. Consider clearing out your closets and donating items that you no longer use to a charity, volunteering, sending a note or card to someone that needs social contact, holding the door for someone, letting the next car merge with traffic or doing any act of kindness that sends positive energy into the world.

Megan Andrews

First and foremost, take care of yourself physically, get sleep, eat and drink in moderation, and move your body. How you feel physically will impact how well you are able to manage emotionally.

Second, focus on consistency over intensity. Start small, take ten minutes each day to “turn off” your brain – through meditation, intentional breathing, diving into a book or show, intensely listening to a friend’s story, engaging in physical exercise or doing anything that gives you a break from what is going on in your head. Doing something small and easy every day will support your emotional management, freeing yourself to enjoy the season.

If you have a loved one with a mental health challenge, you will be helping others by taking care of yourself first. When you are able to manage your emotions, you will be in a better position to support others.

Maura Kelley offers her perspective on selfcare for people with mental health challenges:

For me, the most important part of taking care of myself, during this time, is to always remember I have choices. And I remind myself that it is very ok to practice my Assertive Rights.

Such as the right to say “no.” The right to not know the answer. And always knowing I have the right to leave at any time, no matter how it looks to others.

When I do this, which is pretty common, my family is very understanding, not judgmental, and supportive. Now it’s a running joke and they playfully take bets on how long I stay at the event. I also have an “easy out.” My dog Ozzy is always welcomed at my family gatherings. And sometimes he is a great excuse to just take a break from it all, and go for a short walk, or to take time to just pet him and enjoy his company and loyalty to me. ■

Upcoming Events

DECEMBER 15

Facebook Live – The State of Stigma:
Managing The Anxiety of the Season
Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition

JANUARY 10

Difficult Conversations About Diversity,
A Practical Approach
Horizon

JANUARY 27

Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, but Words
DO Hurt Me: Decolonizing Language in our Work.

More Events & Information: Visit letstalkstigma.org/events

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBER



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

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

Spotlight: A Q&A with Visible Man

Visible Man is building better men for others through mental health advocacy and suicide prevention. We spoke with Jeff Hoffman, founder of Visible Man, who shared his insight into stigma and the crisis of male suicide.



Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

Visible Man aims to end the problem of male suicide through connection, education, and training. We are a free, online support community of men and women who recognize that in order to address the high rate of male suicide, we must cultivate safe, constructive dialog around difficult topics and make it easy for men to connect. To do this, we meet on a Discord (text, voice, video chat) server where we host discussions and guest speakers on topics such as divorce, addiction, abuse, relationships, parenting, sexuality, and more. The VM server makes it easy to engage in text- or voice discussions with men from around the world, within a safe, actively moderated space that is partitioned into a public-facing section where anyone can participate, and a men-only section. The men-only section makes it safer for guys to open up, while the public section ensures the discussion is balanced with perspectives from all genders. Visible Man is excited to participate in the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition because it grows opportunities to connect with men through partnerships with the coalition members and those they serve. You can join the Visible Man Discord community at this link: discord.gg/BVQwwJ5

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

Men die by suicide at a rate four times that of women—one every 60 seconds—and use lethal means more often, meaning that men are more likely to complete a suicide attempt. While a man's choice to be vulnerable can create the opportunity for connection, which is a protective factor against suicide, it lies in direct opposition to how society expects men to be strong and not need help. In this way, the stigma of appearing weak prevents men from seeking the help they need with mental health challenges.

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

The Anti-Stigma coalition's campaign accelerates the impact that Visible Man can have on the community by connecting with more men who need support, and with the loved ones of those men. The coalition bridges mental health providers with the community that needs it, making it easier to reach men and for those men to connect. A recent comment by a member of the Visible Man community captures the impact that these connections can have: "I went through one of the hardest times in my life during the spring and summer, and I found this server and everyone and everything it has to offer helped me out of it." ■



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.