



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

MARGARET MEAD

Surviving the Holidays

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Deborah Amesbury, LCSW

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

There are often implied, if not explicit, expectation of certain types of behavior (e.g., exchanging gifts, socializing), feelings (happiness), etc. that are hard to live up to.

Large groups can be over-stimulating and confusing for individuals diagnosed with a brain disorder.

Holidays can be painful reminders of times past when things were better, thus highlighting present difficulties related to coping with a brain disorder.

Family get-togethers can raise the issue of what to tell people about the illness, what it's like living with a mental illness? etc.

Holidays lend themselves to individuals comparing themselves unfavorable to others. Other family members can experience survivor's guilt.

Families can reduce 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 member 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 for how long and what participation the person is comfortable with;
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, needs and preferences;
7. Being flexible and allowing for some changes in plans and participation, when possible;

8. Strategizing how to handle some of the stress, e.g., how to answer personal questions, what tasks each person will focus on, how long to stay at get-togethers, where get-togethers will be held, taking breaks, etc.

For those who find the holidays stressful:

Participate only in those activities you really enjoy.

S_L_O_W down. The thing most people want for the holidays is "relaxed time with family and/or friends." "Hectic" is a choice — if you don't want a hectic holiday, make changes.

Accept your own limitations and don't be afraid to let others know what they are. If you can't be in 3 places at once, say so!

Relax your "holiday Standards." Leave the perfect holiday homes, tables, parties, clothes and families to the magazines.

Remember. Healthy living is important to both good mental and good physical well being. Balance good nutrition with the pies, cakes and candies of the holidays. Limit alcohol intake.

Exercise can help relieve stress and depression. Whenever possible, WALK!

Smile! Laugh! Relish the fun things in life. If you hear a good joke, share it. If you see a "feel good" movie, let others know about it.

Don't correct or criticize. The holidays are about kindness and love, not about perfection, advice or achievements.

Roll with the punches. Be flexible and don't let the "unexpected" throw you.

Take some time alone. Use it to read a good book, take a nap or just watch the sunset. You might just find out what a really neat person you are.

Adapted from *When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness* by Rebecca Woolis