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MOSAIC MENTAL HEALTH TIPS

THE OFFICIAL EAP NEWSLETTER FROM MOSAIC COUNSELING

5 WAYS TO MANAGE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE HOLIDAYS, ACCORDING TO A THERAPIST

Tis the Season

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The weeks between Thanksgiving and New Years are said to be the "happiest time of the year." But for many people, the holiday season is actually the saddest or loneliest time of year.

From financial strain to family dysfunction, the holidays can amplify existing problems. They can also introduce new issues, like the pressure to pick out the perfect gift or the pressure to host large holiday gatherings.

So it's no surprise that research shows mental health problems increase this time of year. A 2014 survey by NAMI found that 64% of people with an existing mental illness say their symptoms worsen during the holidays.

WHAT WE DO (AND DON'T) PRIORITIZE

I've seen this firsthand as requests for therapy appointments in my office skyrocketed around Thanksgiving. Existing clients often want to be seen more often, former clients request to come back to treatment, and potential new clients inquire about starting services.

Yet, therapy attendance rates often decline this time of year. It's likely that people want to take care of their mental health but they put their emotional well-being low on the priority list. Perhaps they feel too overwhelmed and busy to take time out for themselves to actually attend appointments even when they recognize they're having a problem.

HOLIDAY STRESS

It's not just those individuals who have already been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, or another mental health issue who experience increased distress.

Depending on which survey results you read, you'll find the internet claims anywhere between 38% and 70% of people report higher levels of stress during the holidays.

But you likely don't need to read a study on that to confirm that it's true. There's a good chance you feel the stress and see it in those around you.

Fortunately, there are some things you can do to take a proactive approach to managing your mental health during even the busiest of holiday seasons. Here are five things you can do to stay as mentally healthy as possible this time of year:

1. CREATE A GOAL FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Before you get too deep into holiday planning and celebrations, pause and ask yourself what you want the holidays to be like this year.

Do you want to focus on spending time with your family? Do you want to host a huge holiday party where you get everyone together? Do you want a quiet low-stress holiday season where you don't do much out of the ordinary? Having that goal in mind will help you decide what to say yes to and which invitations and opportunities to decline. If your goal is to spend quality time with your family, you might worry less about getting the decorations perfect (unless decorating gives you quality time together).

If your goal is to host a huge gathering, you might decline a lot of other invitations so you can focus on getting ready for the party you're going to throw. Once you have a goal, it's easier to know which invitations to say yes to and which opportunities to decline as you create the type of holiday season you want.

2. ESTABLISH TIME LIMITS

A lot of holiday stress stems from feeling as though there isn't enough time to get things done. One way to solve that problem is to establish reasonable time limits for yourself.

If you usually spend countless hours shopping for gifts, set a time limit on how long you're going to shop (either online or in the store). When you have a deadline, you'll be efficient. Walk into the mall or log on to a site thinking, "I have two hours to buy presents for six people."

Have a plan for what you'll do when time runs out. For example, you might tell yourself you'll shop for two hours and if you don't find all the gifts you want, you'll buy gift cards.

You can do this for other holiday tasks too. Set a limit on how many hours you'll spend baking or decorating or doing other tasks that you don't love doing but they take up a huge chunk of time.

It also keeps those little tasks from getting away from you. Otherwise, you might spend eight hours baking holiday treats when you think that task is only worth two hours of your time.

3. SCHEDULE ACTIVITIES THAT ARE GOOD FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Get proactive about your schedule to prevent all your time from being filled in with extra holiday activities. Put some things on your calendar that are going to bolster your mental strength this year.

Sometimes, simple things–like watching your favorite movie by yourself or reading a good book–might go a long way toward boosting your mood.

Think of those healthy activities as an investment. If you put time into doing things that are good for your mental health, you'll have more patience, energy, and happiness to deal with stressful activities.

4. LIMIT THINGS THAT AREN'T GOOD FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

The holidays make it tempting to indulge in so many ways. From eating or drinking too much, to spending too much, or even scrolling too much, overindulgence takes a toll on your well-being.

Identify your personal traps. Perhaps you like to buy yourself a few too many treats when you're shopping for others. While it makes you feel good for a minute, it adds more stress to your life when the bills roll in.

Or maybe you love to eat holiday chocolates, cookies, and candy. But, you regret your decisions when you feel sluggish from a sugar crash later.

Perhaps you spend a lot of time looking at what other people are doing on social media. It prevents you from feeling bored for a few minutes but it might also lead you to believe everyone else is having a joy-filled holiday season with friends and family while you're the only one sitting at home scrolling through social media.

So be on the lookout for the things that tempt you in the short-term but cause you to feel worse in the long-term. And get smart about limiting them. That may mean baking less if you're tempted by sweet treats, setting a clear spending limit each time you shop, or monitoring your social media use.

5. PUT THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE WITH THE "LAST YEAR TEST"

Holiday stress can affect the way you think about yourself, your circumstances, and other people. You might think certain things matter much more than they do, which can increase your stress level even more and create a vicious cycle.

When you think things like, "I have to find the perfect gift," pause and apply "the last year test." Ask yourself, how many gifts do you recall receiving last year? You might not remember any gifts from just a year ago.

Then, think about the future. How likely is it that this person will remember the gift you got them next year? It's not likely at all.

Apply this strategy to other holiday things as well. If you pressure yourself to decorate perfectly, ask yourself how someone else's decorations looked last year. You likely can't remember. So remind yourself, no one will remember how your decorations look next year either.

Any time you put pressure on yourself to do more or to impress other people, use "the last year test" to put things in perspective. It can remind you that many of the things you feel obligated to do really don't matter as much as you think.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Can Help

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If the holidays aren't your happiest time of year, that's OK. You don't have to pretend they are. In fact, if you talk to someone you trust about some of the challenges you experience, you might find they open up and talk about their holiday struggles a little more freely as well.

Call Mosaic Counseling at (616) 842-9160 to begin using your EAP

If you're experiencing holiday distress this year, try putting these tips into practice. If you need more help, call or text 988 to reach the mental health crisis hotline, and/or call Mosaic Counseling to be referred to a therapist matched to your needs and preferences.