Good Mental Health and Handling Holiday Stress

Lili Lutgens, LCSW
Holiday Stress and Depression

Sources of Stress:

- Family expectations and demands
- Blending family traditions
- Conflict (politics, long standing family conflict, religion)
- Expenses resulting in financial stressors
- Disappointment
- Disordered Eating
- Excessive Drinking
- Shorter days and less sunlight contributing to Seasonal Affective Disorder
- Grief and loss
Family Expectations & Demands

- Purchasing gifts for too many people
- Multiple celebrations on the same day
- Expectation to spend hours at each celebration
- Planning and hosting large family gatherings
Strategies for Family Expectations/Demands

Set reasonable goals before hand

Budget
• Suggest drawing names
• Suggest Secret Santa or just buying for kids

Limit holiday prep (have others bring dishes or cater)

Prepare holiday hosts up front about time limit
• Or suggest a different day to celebrate

Engage in socially acceptable avoidance (volunteer)

Plan a post holiday night out with friends
Blending Family Traditions

Partnering means blending

Every family has their own traditions regardless of what holidays they celebrate

Be open to different cultures and traditions

Don’t judge, at least not openly

Consider forming your own holiday traditions (especially helpful for families blending children)
Family Conflict
Family Conflict

The title of this picture is “Let Politics Ruin Thanksgiving.”

- Unless everyone is in lockstep agreement, no politics or religion
- The holidays are not the time to rehash family disagreements
- Plan 5 safe topics for discussion
- Politely redirect political and religious topics “Let’s not talk about that now.”
- If family members are more likely to behave around outsiders, invite a friend
Expenses Leading to Financial Stress

Holiday expenses include:

- Travel
- Expectation of expensive gifts
- Expectation of expensive holiday events
- Clothing for celebrations

Solutions:

- Stick to a budget for gifts, clothing, and events
- Acknowledge feelings of guilt, especially with children
- Focus is more on gratitude for family and friends, not gifts
Disappointment

Sometimes the holidays are seen as a way to make up to family and friends for past disappointments
  ● Making up for lost time you spent working instead of with your partner, spouse, or children
  ● Making up for past holidays when you behaved in ways you now wish you hadn't
  ● Showing off how well you can cook or how much you have earned

But Holidays are temporary. Time not spent with family, embarrassment about your behavior, wanting others to see how talented/successful you are are longer term problems

  ● Set realistic expectations
  ● Dichotomy of Control
  ● Save the things that need to change for next year when you are able to commit daily to making these changes (spending more time with family, work/life balance)
  ● Seek out assistance if you find yourself preoccupied with feeling like a failed parent, partner, or person
In the field of mental health, we recognize eating disorders including the diagnosis of Binge Eating Disorder.

Diagnostic Criteria:

- Lack of control over eating during binge episodes (eating more in a 2 hour period than is more than most people would eat)
- Eating more rapidly than normal, eating until uncomfortably full, eating alone out of embarrassment, feelings of disgust, depression, or guilt following the episode
- Binge eating episodes occur at least once a week for 3 months.
Disordered eating is the term used by dietitians and nutritionists to describe an unhealthy relationship with food.

Disordered eating is often exacerbated by food-centered holidays.

People with unhealthy relationships with food tend to either under-eat or more commonly overeat.

- **Under-eating** -- Typically occurs when a person is sensitive about their weight and appearance.
  - People who struggle with this issue often need mental health treatment to help them address their issues with self-concept.

- **Overeating** -- Typically occurs when people use food to cope with negative feeling states, low self-esteem, frustration, stress, anger, dissatisfaction, emptiness.
Know your relationship with food.

If you have a tendency to overeat, try these strategies:

- Try filling out half of your plate with healthier options such as fruits and vegetables. Then fill the rest of your plate with the foods you prefer.
  - Denying yourself access to preferred foods can make things worse.
- Before eating second servings, wait 15 minutes. This will allow you to determine if you are still hungry or just eating out of boredom, frustration, etc.
  - If you are still a little hungry, decide whether to get a second helping or if you want dessert.
- Try to use small plates for desert. If using a larger plate, fill no more than \( \frac{1}{3} \) to \( \frac{1}{2} \) with dessert.
Eating is also about enjoyment and socializing with others.

- Research on 3 elements of Mediterranean diet (exercise, food choices, and eating with friends and family). Need all 3 to be effective.
- Avoid stressful conversations.
- Enjoy the company of others.

Enjoying food is important.

- With the increase in obesity in the United States, we have developed a perception that enjoying food is somewhat taboo (eat to live not live to eat).
- Moderation is key.
- One holiday meal is not going to make or break you.

Disordered Eating
Alcohol Use Disorder

Diagnostic Criteria include:

- Consumption in larger amounts and/or over a longer period of time than was intended
- Drinking that interferes with occupational, educational, or social responsibilities
- Persistent desire or unsuccessful attempts to cut down on consumption
- Spending a great deal of time obtaining, using, or recovering from alcohol
- Craving or a strong desire to use alcohol
- Recurrent alcohol use in situations in which it is physically hazardous
- Tolerance (a need for more alcohol to achieve intoxication)
- Withdrawal (sweating, tremors, insomnia, nausea or vomiting, transient hallucinations (visual, tactile, or auditory))
Excessive Drinking

Alcohol Misuse

• Binge drinking
  • Drinking that elevates blood alcohol level to .08%
  • For males this means 5 or more drinks over 2 hours
  • For females, 4 or more drinks over 2 hours
  • Drinking leading to destructive behaviors (drunk driving)
• Heavy drinking
The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines the cut off between moderate and heavy drinking as:

- For males, 4 drinks a day or 14 a week
- For females, 3 drinks a day or 7 a week

Drink is defined as:

- 1.5 ounces of hard liquor (40% alcohol)
- 5 ounces of wine (12% alcohol)
- 12 ounces of regular beer (5% alcohol)
- 8 to 9 ounces of malt beverages (7% alcohol)
Excessive Drinking

It’s not unusual for people to drink more during the holidays in light of the celebrations that people attend but it is important to know when drinking becomes a problem.

It is a good idea to talk to someone if you experience any of the following:

- Drinking more than you intended
- Unable to moderate your drinking or stop even though you are trying to
- Spending a great deal of time planning to drink or recovering from drinking

You can start by reaching out to KYLAP 502-226-9373.
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism is part of the National Institutes of Health
Emotion Regulation Skills

Attorneys like to feel in control
If we feel bad, something must change
Feeling bad = weakness

Negative feeling

Vulnerable feeling
Emotion Regulation Skills

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Well established
- Proven effective
- Focus is on identifying maladaptive thoughts
- That lead to problematic feelings

Pessimistic Thinkers
- Personal
- Pervasive
- Permanent

Just add in rumination
Emotion Regulation Skills

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Steps:

• Identifying negative thoughts and how they impact feelings
• Looking for evidence in support of and against the negative thought
• Entertaining more realistic thoughts

Resource: Learned Optimism by Martin Seligman
Seasonal Affective Disorder

SAD is a form of depression that is seasonal in nature, most commonly occurring in the Fall and Winter months.

Symptoms of SAD include the same symptoms as generally appear with depression, and may include the following: frequent feelings of sadness; lack of motivation or interest in normal, daily routines; sleep issues (too much or too little); appetite issues (increased or decreased); feelings of guilt, hopelessness, worthlessness; and thoughts of death.

Although it is not known what causes SAD, the impact of reduced sunlight on neurotransmitters such as serotonin likely plays a part.

Treatment recommendations include:

- Antidepressant medications
- Mental health therapy
- Light therapy (use of a specialized light box for 30 to 45 minutes a day)
Grief and loss

The holidays are a powerful reminder of loss

- The holidays are special events and so tend to stick out in our memories
- We spend the holidays with loved ones
- We are told that loved ones are what makes the holidays matter
- When the holidays come along and our loved one is gone, our sense of their loss is intensified
Grief and loss

Grief is like a backpack. You grow more comfortable with its presence, but it’s always here with you.

Grief is normal and remembering it is normal to feel this way will make emotions less intense and long lasting.

- Give yourself permission to feel what you feel.

Think about what you need during the holidays, especially in terms of a balance of celebration and time to yourself.

- It’s okay to keep visits short. Drive yourself or go with a friend who understands you may need to leave early.
- It’s okay to say no to some events so long as you don’t say no to all.

Find ways to honor memories of your loved one.

Create new traditions, especially if the deceased was instrumental in organizing celebrations.

Reach out and ask for help if you need it.
Self Care

- Set a plan and budget for the holidays and stick to it
- Limit alcohol consumption
- Get enough sleep
- Avoid overeating
- Work exercise into your routine
- And remember, for good or for bad, the holidays are TEMPORARY
- Remember Dichotomy of Control
If you need help:

- EAP (4 free sessions with a licensed mental health clinician)
- KYLAP 502-226-9373
- National Suicide Hotline 1-800-273-8255
- Learned Optimism by Martin Seligman