Coping During This Holiday Season

The holidays are often seen as a joyous occasion and a chance to come together with friends and family. This holiday season, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the war abroad and continued threat of terrorism at home, many people will benefit from the opportunity to connect with others. But for many individuals and families, this time of year will be difficult whether or not they have been directly affected by recent events.

For those who have lost loved ones in the terrorist attacks or other events during the past year, these will be the first holidays without relatives and friends. Military families may be celebrating the holidays apart from family members involved in our nation’s response to terrorism. In addition, many people are reluctant to travel and therefore might not be with those close to them. People who have been laid off or suffering because of the slow economy may experience financial strains in a season that has become increasingly commercialized. For others who are estranged from family and friends, this season can be an intensely lonely and sad period, and make them feel more isolated from those who are enjoying the holidays.

As we enter this holiday season, it is important to remember that many Americans are coping with anxiety and trauma at a time that often causes additional stress. Instead of feeling joy, many people may experience the “holiday blues” and not feel like celebrating.

Tips for Coping

Taking care of yourself during a stressful holiday season is one of the best things you can do for yourself and those around you. All Americans are coping with our nation’s losses in varying degrees and will react differently to the holidays this year.

- Try to set realistic goals for the holidays. Keep expectations simple for yourself and others.
- Make a budget and stick to it. Financial worries add more stress. Don’t try to keep up with everyone else. Spend what you can afford. Seek out free activities.
- Try not to overeat or drink excessively to escape stressful feelings. Eat healthy foods and get plenty of exercise.
- When traveling, allow extra time. Recognize that delays may occur because of increased security.
- Remember that the holidays are more than one day; they are part of a whole season. Pace yourself. Spread enjoyable activities throughout the entire season.
- Try a new way of celebrating. Attend a celebration of another faith or community or give the gift of your time to someone else.
- Helping others can also help you feel better. Volunteer at a homeless shelter, buy a present for a child in need or visit people in nursing homes.
- If you do not have friends or family to visit with, reach out. Contact local clubs, religious groups or community centers to see if they are holding activities that may interest you.
- Recognize that everyone is responding to the current situation differently. Allow yourself to feel sadness, anger or lonely feelings. Nurture yourself. Take some time out each day to care for and celebrate yourself.
- Respect and validate others’ thoughts and feelings.
- Try to stay in the present. Look forward to the future. Life is full of changes. Consider what is important in your life and good about these times.
Signs to Seek Help

Though some people may experience “holiday blues” that pass with the season, others will have profound feelings of sadness or depression that do not go away over time. Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Sleeping too much or too little, middle-of-the night or early morning waking
- Reduced appetite and weight loss or increased appetite and weight gain
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities, including sex
- Irritability or restlessness
- Difficulty thinking, concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Feeling inappropriate guilt, hopelessness or worthlessness

If you are experiencing these symptoms over a period of several weeks, you may be depressed. Talking with a mental health professional or taking a mental health screening test can help you understand how well you are coping with recent events. Seek help.

For additional resources, please contact the Mental Health America of Illinois at (312) 368-9070 ext. 10, or via our website at www.mhai.org.