

How to maintain your mental wellness during the holidays

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There are things people who are at risk of depression should keep in

mind as they enter the holiday season, but Christmas isn't necessarily the mental health threat it's made out to be.

According to University of Alberta psychiatry professor Adam Abba-Aji, what used to be called "Christmas depression syndrome" was debunked in the 1980s after researchers examined the daily suicide rate over a nine-year period and found it actually dips over the Christmas holidays, with a modest increase after. The study was replicated in South Korea in 2016 with the same results.

"Up until that point, we all thought that depression would increase during the holiday seasons because [support systems](#)—friends, family, therapists—often break away and people are going on holiday," said Abba-Aji.

Instead, Christmas can bring about what professionals refer to as the "post-holiday blues," which Abba-Aji said are less about depression and more a reflection of regret from something that happened, or didn't happen, over the holidays or the previous year.

"The blues don't meet the criteria where you say that this is depression, which is a pervasive, continuous feeling of sadness regardless of whatever emotions you associate it with," he said. "The post-[holiday blues](#), which come with decreased energy or a lack of motivation, tend to go away after a few days."

And yet, the holidays can be hard on people, especially those at risk of mental illness.

Abba-Aji said for many the holidays are fraught with a history of interpersonal conflict or sad memories of loved ones who have passed.

"In a season where everybody's laughing, smiling and cracking jokes, if

someone is more reserved than normal and keeping to themselves or verbalizing ideas of worthlessness, these changes in behaviour should raise a flag to what is happening," he said.

Alex Clark, a psychosocial health researcher in the Faculty of Nursing, said one of the main sources behind symptoms of [depression](#), such as loneliness, anxiety and helplessness, is comparing yourself to others.

"The reality is that those who struggle with issues around family often think, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to be alone at Christmas?'" he said.

"Paradoxically, people somehow think they will feel better by withdrawing, but the research actually suggests we feel better the more we're connected to other people."

What you can do

Clark said families bring with them their own unique sets of challenges, so planning ahead and being aware of the hot family issues are critical.

"It's a good idea to agree on things that you're not going to talk about and focus on those things that tend to unite us at this time of year," he said.

Clark added the [holiday season](#) is a time when support systems tend to disband, especially for post-secondary students who might be stuck on campus.

For those left alone, Clark said this is a wonderful time of year to volunteer and give something back as a way of staying connected.

"Though it's not usually the thing we think might help, it is often the thing that really does help," he said.

Abba-Aji noted some easy measures to take that will help in steering

clear of mental health triggers include spending within your means and continuing with healthy habits.

"People may go on to borrow a lot of money and then struggle to pay for it after. Having that as additional stress may trigger the illness," he said. "As well, if you exercise in the morning, don't break that routine. Wherever you go, maintain your healthy routine."

Once the holidays are in full effect, Clark noted the revelry should not be seen as an excuse to increase [alcohol consumption](#).

"Your brain will not excuse you from the effects of alcohol. If you're on medication, it might not be as effective—and alcohol itself is a depressant, so it can have the opposite effect on our moods than what we may think," he said.

Clark added it's important to make sure you take some time to treat yourself over the holidays.

"And just know that others are there to help," he said. "We have really good services in the province and on campuses. If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't hesitate to contact someone."

Provided by University of Alberta

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