Loneliness and the holiday season

Everywhere we turn during the holiday season, we are bombarded by happy and uplifting messages—on television we see images of people opening the "perfect gift", and, on the streets we are awash in a festive decorations and seasonal light displays.



So why at different times during the holiday season do so many of us experience loneliness, stress or depression? We find that the holidays do not "bring out the best in us", but instead introduce feelings that leave us sad and potentially confused by what we are going through.

The first thing to remember is that you are not alone in feeling this way; it is common for the holidays to bring up feelings of being alone, rushed, harried and pressured. On the one hand, you are expected to be joyous and festive and in the holiday spirit, but what if:

You are feeling lonely, and family and friends are not available or nearby?

The holidays remind you of someone you've lost or can't be with?

You feel that the details are getting in the way of your holiday enjoyment?

You are just feeling down and are uncertain as to why?

It is not uncommon for the holidays to trigger a wide variety of emotions, reactions and situations that are difficult to deal with. Couple this with the false impression that everyone else around you is enjoying themselves, and it is no wonder that so many of us are vulnerable to feeling a sense of isolation.

Feeling Lonely?

The first step in dealing with loneliness is to understand that no one is immune to this feeling. It is also important to realize that you do not have to be "alone" in order to suffer the negative effects of loneliness. It is very common to feel a sense of isolation even when surrounded by people at events such as family get-togethers, office functions or even standing in the middle of a crowd in a jam-packed shopping centre.

Acknowledging loneliness is not the cure to feeling this way. It is, however, the first important step in dealing with and managing your reactions to this very powerful emotion. A simple and effective way of combating the effects of feeling alone is to relax, slow down and take stock of your situation and how you are reacting to it.

If you are feeling an overwhelming sense of being alone, try to:

- **Connect with people in your life by phone, by email or by writing a letter or sending a card.** There are also other people around you who may be experiencing similar feelings during the holidays. Find out how those around you are doing and hook up with them. Whether your family is near or far, these interactions help you establish a feeling of connection with the world.

- **Determine what brings on this sense of "being alone"**—each reaction is usually "triggered" by an event, situation or perception. By dealing with each "trigger" on its own, you may help reduce a sense of being overwhelmed and alone in facing your feelings.

Missing someone you can't be with?

One of the most common triggers for loneliness during the holiday season is to be reminded that someone who would normally be a source of comfort, familiarity and joy is no longer a part of your life, or your celebration.

Whether you are dealing with a separation or divorce, being apart from your children, or grieving the loss of a loved one, the holidays can serve as a reminder of what we feel we are missing in our lives.

This is a normal part of dealing with loss or change. It is not uncommon to feel that everything that is a source of happiness to those around you is in fact a painful reminder of your current situation or recent loss. At social gatherings, people are laughing and talking about what is important to them and what makes them happy. A particular sound, someone's laugh or, even a specific holiday song can instantly remind you of how things used to be and what you might be doing if things were different.

This is especially true in cases where we are reminded of a death of a loved one, but also applies every time you think: my partner and I used to or if I wasn't divorced, my kids and I would be."

These thoughts can overwhelm us and impact our emotional state, our ability to interact with others or enjoy ourselves. When these situations arise, it is important to take the time to understand and evaluate what we are feeling in a realistic and manageable way.

Avoiding these feelings will only deepen our sense of loneliness and invite a greater a sense of isolation from those around us.

Try to:

- **Deal with these memories as they arise by sharing them with those around you in a positive way.** Remember what it was that you enjoyed about a person or situation during a previous holiday season. These positive memories can not only comfort us, but they can also serve as a source of joy for ourselves as well as the people around us.

- **Listen to your thoughts and feelings and trust your instincts.** Friends and family can be an excellent source of comfort during the holidays, but only you can determine and decide what it is that is best for you. Do not shut people out, but do not be afraid of politely declining invitations or saying "no" in order to take the time that you need to deal with your loss.

What about me? It can be very difficult to set aside time for yourself during the holidays.

Between finding the perfect gift, making travel plans and meeting family and social commitments, losing track of yourself, and your own needs, is an easy thing to do.

When you feel the details are getting in the way of enjoying the holidays, try to:

- **Identify and eliminate unnecessary stress by not over-extending yourself.** The holidays are not only supposed to be about commitments, but also about rest and relaxation and serve as a break in our hectic lives.

- **Take the time you need to appropriately plan for events and commitments.** By doing this you will not only get through what "needs to be done", but you will also give yourself the chance to enjoy the process and each step along the way.

Feeling more than the "holiday blues?"

Sometimes we need a little bit more than just time to ourselves to properly manage our emotions because what we are experiencing may be more serious than just the "holiday blues".

Experiencing short episodes of feeling down during what is often referred to as 'the festive season' is completely normal. It is when we are caught in a persistent feeling of sadness over an extended period of time, that we may be experiencing depression.

Other signs of depression can also include:

- A loss of interest in pursuits that were previously enjoyable
- Trouble falling asleep or sleeping too much
- Increase or decrease in appetite or weight
- Feeling tired and weak
- Feeling anxious or restless

- Problems concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Crying more easily than usual
- Feeling overwhelmed by negative thoughts
- Feeling worthless, guilty, helpless or hopeless
- Thinking or talking about death or suicide

If you experience any of the warning signs of depression listed above, or have any other reason to suspect that you may be suffering from depression, it is important to seek professional help and set up a support structure that can help you through this difficult time. Other things that can help you deal with depression on a day-to-day basis include:

- **Doing your best to stay healthy:** evaluate what and how you eat, avoid the use of alcohol and drugs, go for walks and do your best to keep physically fit.

- **Connecting with friends and family and participating in activities and events.**

It is important to understand that the depression is not your fault. You may want to talk to people who have gone through, and recovered from, a similar experience. Remember it can be managed and it does not have to control your life.

Whether you are feeling lonely, experiencing a loss or lifestyle change, losing your sense of holiday enjoyment, or are worried about depression, remembering that you are not alone in your struggle is your first step in changing things for the better.