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## Canadian Mental Health Association Offers Ten Tips for Holiday Peace of Mind

The holiday season is a time many of us look forward to – sometimes with anticipation, sometimes with dread. For many, holidays can mean extra pressures: more decisions, more financial burdens, more cleaning and decorating, more cooking, more entertaining. Peace on Earth may seem impossible if you don't have peace of mind.

Some of the best ways to deal with added stress around the holiday season are common sense strategies, and may be especially helpful to those at risk for mental health problems like depression or anxiety. Holiday stress hits all of us – as we are all different, we can only be affected in different ways. A person who's struggling to make ends meet, with few family connections for example, may not connect to some of the experiences of others during this very social season, and yet any of us who have to balance the competing demands of finances, family visits, gift-giving, work and other social engagements associated with the holiday season, can be affected in other ways. The key is making a commitment to your mental health and putting some of these strategies to work.

### The Canadian Mental Health Association offers Ten Tips for Holiday Peace of Mind:

- 1. Plan ahead.** If you're entertaining, use the "keep it simple" strategy. Try menus you can make ahead of time or at least partially prepare and freeze. Decorate, cook, shop or do whatever's on your list in advance. Then you can really relax and enjoy visiting friends, relatives and coworkers.
- 2. As much as possible, organize and delegate.** Make a list and check it twice. In many families, moms do most of the holiday preparations. Have a "family meeting" and make a commitment to care about mom's mental health and share tasks. Rather than one person cooking the whole family meal, ask different family members or friends to bring a dish. Kids can help with gift-wrapping, decorating, baking, or addressing cards. Don't overextend yourself with too many commitments. Focus on doing what's really important to you and your family. If it's hard to choose between activities, rotate outings every two or three years.
- 3. Beware of overindulgence.** Having a few too many glasses of egg nog can dampen your holiday spirit since alcohol is a depressant. Also, too much fruitcake and too little exercise will probably make you feel lethargic, tired, and guilty come Boxing Day. Exercising as a family to work out excess energy and stress is a great activity to schedule during hectic weeks.
- 4. Stay within budget.** Finances are a great stressor. Again, eliminate the unnecessary. Set a budget, and stay within it. A call, a visit or a note to tell someone how important they are to you can be as touching and more meaningful than a gift. You can also enjoy free activities like driving around to look at holiday decorations, going window shopping without buying, or making your own decorations.
- 5. Remember what the holiday season is about for you.** Make that your priority. While holiday advertising creates a picture that the holidays are about shiny new toys and gift giving, remember that this season is really about sharing, loving and time spent with family and loved ones. Develop your own meaningful family traditions that don't have to cost a lot of money.

**6. Invite others.** If you have few family or friends, reach out to neighbors. Find ways to spend the holidays with other people. If you're part of a family gathering, invite someone you know is alone to your gathering.

**7. Help others learn about shared social responsibility.** Attend diverse cultural events with family friends. Help out at a local food bank or another community organization. Go through closets and donate clothes and toys. Encourage children to make gifts for friends and relatives so the focus is on giving rather than buying.

**8. Gift-giving made easier and less expensive.** Try putting family members and partners' names in a hat and buy one gift for the person you draw; this can help reduce expenses and refocus energies on thoughtfulness, creativity and truly personal gifts. If you find that your list of gift recipients is becoming ever-growing, think of combined gifts for people who live in the same household.

**9. Put fun, humor, affection, and "break time" into your holidays.** Fun or silly things to do, games or movies that make you laugh, hugs, playing with pets, and time alone or with a partner are all good ways to reduce stress. Watching children can also help us put things in perspective. You can even have a bubble bath and help those who are struggling with mental health problems year round.

**10. Remember the weather doesn't help.** Research suggests that elevated depression around this time of year may be more a function of the weather than celebratory burdens. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), or clinical depression that follows a seasonal pattern (usually worsening between October and March), is thought to affect around 2-3% of the general population. If your dampened moods carry on into the New Year and seem to do so each year, you may want to consult a physician or mental health professional.

The Canadian Mental Health Association, Winnipeg Region is part of a nation-wide, charitable organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness.

## Dealing with Holiday Grief

The holiday season can be especially rough for those of us who've lost someone close recently or who lost someone close at this time of the year. With all the messages of family togetherness and joy, the emptiness left behind when someone passes away is in harsh contrast to what society seems to "expect" us to feel. Below are some tips to help you or someone you know get through a potentially hard time:

- **Talking about the deceased person is okay.** Your stress will only increase if the deceased person's memory is allowed to become a landmine that everyone tiptoes around.
- **Things won't be the same.** It's normal to feel at odds with yourself and family events when dealing with grief. Do not isolate, but limit involvement when you need to and plan new events.
- **Don't let other people's expectations dictate how your holiday will unfold.** If you don't feel like doing something this Christmas, don't let others force you. If you do want to attend holiday functions, make sure you know your limits. Leave early, arrive late, drive alone – do whatever you need to do to help yourself.
- **Seek support.** Talk to your friends and family about how you feel. Also, many communities offer support groups for people who are grieving. Being around people who know what you're going through can be very comforting.
- **Plan a special time to celebrate the memories of the person who died.** Some families develop creative rituals like decorating a miniature Christmas tree at the cemetery, donating money to a charity like CMHA, singing their favorite seasonal song, reciting a special prayer before the evening meal, or even just lighting a candle. Symbolic gestures like these can help families validate their feelings of sadness and overcome the guilt of enjoying special occasions.
- **Take care of yourself.** Stress, depression and bodily neglect are not a great mix at any time of the year.
- **Think about building some new traditions.** Remember that it's okay not to do what you traditionally do. Planning something totally different is not an insult to the memory of a loved one and can be a positive way to ease some of the pressure.