

Seasons of Tidings and Joy?: Mental Health and the Holidays

Prepared by CHMA NS Division



Ah, the holidays. For some, a time for celebration and relaxation; for others, the holidays bring overwhelming stress and duress. According to the 2014 Sun Life Canadian Health Index, 76% of Canadians experience excessive or uncomfortable levels of stress. The holiday season, with increased expectations and the array of demands, can exacerbate this existing stress and take a toll on our mental well-being.

This season, we encourage Nova Scotians to take time out of their busy schedules to take care of their mental health by engaging in self-care activities. Not sure how? Here are 9 things you can do to care for your mind as we usher in 2017 (adapted from the [Mayo Clinic](#) and [CMHA Alberta](#)).

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** If you have lost someone close to you or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It's OK to take time to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.
2. **Reach out.** If you feel lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events. They can offer support and companionship. Volunteering your time to help others also is a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships.
3. **Have self-compassion.** The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your adult children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.
4. **Embrace family, friends, and community.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Be compassionate if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry; by modeling healthy reactions and support, you can help change the holiday environment to a more cohesive and enjoyable affair for all!

5. **Limit holiday spending.** Before you go gift and food shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend. Then stick to your budget. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts.
Try these alternatives:
 - Donate to a charity in someone's name.
 - Give homemade gifts.
 - Start a family gift exchange.

6. **Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt.
Try these suggestions:
 - Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks.
 - Get plenty of sleep.
 - Incorporate regular physical activity into each day.

7. **Take a moment to breathe.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring inner calm.
Some options may include:
 - Taking a walk at night and stargazing.
 - Listening to soothing music.
 - Getting a massage.
 - Reading a book.

8. **Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

9. **Take time to reflect.** As the year comes to a close, take time to reflect on what has changed and what has stayed the same. Take stock of the things that are going well and the things you are grateful for rather than focusing on the things you don't have.



The CMHA NS Division Board of Directors and Staff wish everyone a happy, safe, and healthy holiday and prosperous new year.