

# **Coping with the Holidays When There is Mental Illness**



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This booklet is a compilation of articles that appeared in a NAMI Metropolitan Baltimore newsletter published in 2006. Website addresses, phone numbers and other citations may have changed since original publication.

# Coping With the Holidays When There is Mental Illness

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## **HOLIDAY MANAGEMENT TIPS FOR COPING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS**

### **HOLIDAYS WOULD BE EASIER IF THEY WEREN'T HOLIDAYS!!!**

By definition, holidays are different than other days. They are special days and they imply the unusual, the unpredictable... they are stress inducing. The general notion of “holiday” is as a festive occasion! There are those generational traditions, special observances, brightly colored decorations, neatly wrapped gifts, and, oh yes, lots of food, family, friends and strangers. Planning and getting through the holidays can be stressful regardless of the anticipated enjoyment of the coming days.

Persons with mental illnesses have more difficulty with the unexpected and change in routine than do others, and they can experience holidays as negative events. Family members may struggle to balance the needs of their relative with a mental illness with the desires of other relatives and friends.

Hectic schedules, numerous activities, large and frequent gatherings, high volume of noise and increased visual stimulation associated with joyous occasions can lead to feelings of confusion, anxiety, depression, reappearance of psychotic symptoms or unwelcome physical changes in eating, sleeping, energy level and daily functioning. Families and their relatives can share strategies for coping with holidays.

## **START PLANNING EARLY**

Begin planning in late September or early October. Find ways to make holiday events more “ordinary.” Does this sound contradictory? Perhaps, but it is central to making the holidays calmer, easier and more manageable.

Those with mental illness need:

- Predictability
- Routine
- Familiarity

## **ASK FOR HELP AND SUPPORT**

If the services/support of a therapist is needed, make an appointment early. A therapist can help to develop a plan that will alleviate stress. Work through unresolved grief; contrast the past and the now. Try not to feel disappointment with the “now.”

Get help with holiday tasks. For example, paying someone to help clean the house might be the best gift you can give yourself. Divide up the chores. Remind yourself that it really doesn’t matter if everything gets done. What matters is that the holidays are enjoyable and as stress-free as possible.

Talk with a friend or family member. Remember to begin your sentence with “I feel” rather than “you....”

Give yourself permission to enjoy the holidays. Be good to yourself. Try not to dwell on negative experiences but rather put yourself in the here and now. Stay close to family and friends that love and support you.

*Edited from materials by Nancy Alexander, LCSW-C*

## **HOLIDAY BLUES**

*The following is one person’s experience of living with a mental illness during the holiday months, which can begin as early as October.*

It’s mid-October, and the trick-or-treaters are planning for their scary costumes and exciting parties. And what do I see at the mall? Pine trees, snowmen, Christmas ornaments, and Hanukkah menorahs.

The holiday season seems to be starting earlier and earlier each year. With each tree and paper snowflake I see, my mood sinks lower. I begin to feel smothered by impending doom as what may be considered the

happiest time of year approaches.

I know what is expected: smiles, laughter, singing, food, and **family!** Both of my palms sweat thinking of it, the holiday blues are here again.

I get ready to pretend everything is well by slapping a smile on my face and being cheerful.

I don't speak to the majority of my family and those I do talk to don't fully understand my illness. Therefore I'm stuck pretending that everything is fine.

If they only knew. If they knew how I miss the whimsy of this season, and the childish glee. If they only knew each carol, each light, breaks my heart a little more. My heart has been broken so many times over the years, I don't know how many holiday smiles I have left.

I celebrate in my own way. I feel down around the holidays but my personal celebration helps me feel a little better. I buy toys and clothes for a needy child. I donate to local food drives. I sing along with the radio (as loud as I can). I send special greeting cards to my friends. I watch "Frosty The Snowman," "Rudolph" and "The Little Drummer Boy." And while it might cause me to cry, I hope my celebration will allow me to release some of my pain.

Although I dream of a "White Christmas," I know it will start off blue.

*Submitted by Darla Guy*

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## **TIPS FOR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES**

If your friend or relative with an illness has religious delusions (for example, thinks he is Jesus, Allah, or Joan of Arc), holiday seasons connected to religious holidays will make those thoughts increase. For example if he thinks he is Jesus, you may want to consider several options:

- not displaying a Nativity scene,
- not encouraging church attendance by the person with the mental illness, or
- not reading the Bible in his presence.

If your friend or relative with mental illness has constant auditory hallucinations and becomes agitated when there are too many competing sounds, you many want to:

- keep the television off,
- play music softly,
- limit the number of people in the environment, and/or

- suggest your relative use head phones and a walkman to keep out outside sounds.

## **ASSESS YOUR UNIQUE SITUATION**

You need to know the possible problem areas and your mentally ill relative's capacities before you proceed. Begin by assessing the following:

- Does she make sense when talking? Does she remember what was said?
- Is she able to plan ahead?
- Can he listen to reason, and work out compromises?
- Does he understand a future-oriented idea?
- Does a schedule help?
- Does she have the patience needed to participate in decision making?
- Is he oppositional?
- Does she have fixed delusional ideas or themes? Do they dominate her actions?
- Can she tolerate crowds? Or more than one or two people at a time?
- Are there things you can do to make him feel more comfortable?
- Do you know what will help?

## **PRIORITIZE**

Before you decide what you can do to make things more manageable, you must know what you are willing to do.

You must be clear about what part of the celebration is really important and traditional to you and your family. Consider the whole picture, not just the person with a mental illness. You may decide it is:

- a large family dinner,
- house decoration,
- going to services,
- opening gifts, or caroling.

Discuss this with your family, spouse, partner, friends or whomever you plan celebrations with and list all aspects of the holiday season that are considered important. You might want to put your list in order (ranking from the most to the least important).

If you are going to try to make holidays more manageable and easier for the person with mental illness, you may have to make the holidays more ordinary. To make them more ordinary, you might have to give something up to get through the holidays without crisis.

If you have to give something up, at least know in advance what you

value most. Compromise is not necessarily a “win or lose” proposition. It’s a decision-making process that involves weighing the pros and cons and making a decision based on them.

## **WHAT’S NEXT?**

After you and others in the family decide what’s most important to you, then consider what is most important to the family member with mental illness. If he is rational enough to take part in a discussion, and can predict his own responses well, the next step is to sit down and talk about the holidays. Below is an example:

*“John, Dad and I have been thinking about our holiday plans for this year and we wanted to ask your opinion about what would be best for you. Do you feel like talking about that with us now?”*

(If “NO” – then ask when you can talk about it. If he is too fragile and easily upset to take part in a lengthy discussion, break it into smaller parts.) For instance:

*“John, do you want to have dinner with Aunt Alice and her kids this year, or do you want to eat at home with Dad, me and Susan?”*

(If your mentally ill family member is too confused to take part in small tasks, you may have to decide what will happen and let him know.)

Consider:

*“John, this year we are eating our holiday dinner at home.”*

## **REHEARSALS AND ROLE PLAYS**

Sometimes anticipation of difficult events can upset those with mental illness, creating resistance, anxiety, and psychotic symptoms. If you can identify such an event, you can plan for it. Rehearsals and role-playing are useful and sometimes fun. You need to be clear about the problem and have some solutions in mind. Do not do this with an autocratic attitude; simply try to offer options through role-plays. For example:

*“John, last year when we went to church, I recall that you were uncomfortable when the pastor asked how you were doing. Let’s try and come up with some different ways to handle that this year, OK?”*

*“I don’t think that’ll help.”*

*“Well, it may not, but let’s spend just five minutes on it and see how it goes, OK?”*

*“OK.”*

*“I’ll pretend to be the pastor, and you pretend to be yourself.”*

*“Merry Christmas, John.”*

*“Hi, Rev. Smith, Merry Christmas.”*

*“Merry Christmas, John. How have you been?”*

*“OK.”*

*“Where are you living now, are you at home?”*

*“Uh, huh.”*

*“Are you working, do you have a job?”*

*“Ahhh, not yet...”*

Break the role playing when it gets difficult. Comment to John that he seems uncomfortable and coach him about how to do it differently. Then role play again and praise John for his efforts. Pick up the role play where it got rough. Remind John of some different words he can use, like:

*“I’m not working yet, but I’m taking a course now.”* Or *“No, I go to the prep program over on Wabash Ave. now.”*

Rehearsing a worrisome exchange can be helpful for persons with mental illness. Of course, they must be willing to participate. If they aren’t, you and your spouse, or friend can do it. Play both parts and ask John to help you, or just watch. If he will watch several times, he may be willing to do it later.

If the person with mental illness gets easily confused and loses track of what is going on, keep the plan simple and rehearse and review as needed.

## **WHAT YOU HAVE TO GAIN OR LOSE**

When we talk about the need to reduce holiday stress for our family member, we mean avoiding family conflict, verbal confrontation, troublesome behavior, violence, psychiatric crisis, relapse or re-hospitalization.

Reducing holiday stress allows family cooperation, a more peaceful holiday, a feeling of control, and feelings of less worry and threat for those involved. ◆

*Edited from materials by Nancy Alexander, LCSW-C*

## **KEEPING THE HOLIDAYS HAPPY**

Families everywhere will soon be gathering with loved ones to celebrate



many different holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanza. People look forward to these holidays with high expectations as a happy time together. As many of us have learned, however, our expectations can often be unrealistic. Holidays don't always reach the perfection hoped for; in turn people are often disappointed. As a consequence some have learned that a more relaxed time with less elaborate and more flexible plans can be more meaningful and less stressful for everyone. This is especially the case when someone in the family has a serious mental illness. Some plans must be changed to accommodate the special needs of the individual.

Because of the nature of these disorders, people with mental illness can easily become over-stimulated due to the confusion and excitement surrounding planning and executing holiday get-togethers. They can become overwhelmed or uncomfortable and react in ways that upset others. One may withdraw into a corner to avoid interaction or another may become loud and argumentative. Families and friends need to be alert to these possibilities and prevent them if possible. When necessary, you can help your loved one find a way to leave an over-stimulating situation in a socially accepted way.

Quite often holidays bring home siblings, cousins, and other relatives eager to talk about their new found successes in college, work, or marriage. This can be painful for those who feel left behind because their mental illness has gotten in the way of their potential achievement. This can be hard for families to deal with. Sometimes they can steer conversation toward other topics—sports, music, movies, etc.—topics that are less threatening and possible for all to discuss. In addition, some activities might be planned that rely less heavily on conversation and more on an activity in which the family member with mental illness can also participate.

It is important to involve relatives with mental illness (if interested) in participating in the holiday celebration. Some may need help and encouragement to purchase gifts for other family members, but it is important that they do so. It may be necessary to help some people plan or go shopping with them. They could also be involved in aspects of cooking, decorating, and serving so that they are as much part of things as possible.

It may take extra planning to make the day go smoothly when a loved one has a special need but it is certainly worth it.

*Submitted by Agnes Hatfield, PhD*

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## **THE HOLIDAY SEASON: How One NAMI Family Copes**

In the past, the mere mention of Thanksgiving made my mouth water and stomach rumble, while the word “Christmas” filled me with visions of family, friends, gifts, and massive amounts of festive decorations.

Seven years ago, however, our holiday season changed forever, when our son had his first critical episode with mental illness. Over the next three years we saw every crisis event occur during late October through December. Suddenly the holidays became a heart wrenching, dreaded time that no longer brought warm thoughts of family and friends.

Why were we repeating this cycle of holiday anxiety? Why were we retracing steps to a path of crisis? It was time for a change. A room located the furthest from our living area was transformed into a refuge, complete with a radio/tape player, comfortable chair, music choices, an assortment of reading material, and (most important) a door to close.

When our son Kevin closes the door, that room is solely for him. At any time he may disappear into “the room,” no questions asked. In “the room” Kevin has the opportunity to kick back in his own personal and safe space.

We have also scaled back the size of our holiday gatherings. Thanksgiving Day is now reserved for immediate family only. This has made the time less confusing, unpredictable, and tension creating. We scheduled another time to celebrate with extended family and friends.

I realized my cherished memories weren’t of hustle, bustle, and a flurry of activities; they were being with loved ones sharing quiet time and conversation. Why, then, was I dashing about trying to prepare a seven course meal and entertainment? No satisfying answer came to mind. Instead I made everyone’s favorite foods, cut back on the number of courses, and stopped trying to orchestrate such large detailed events. “Let things flow naturally” and “don’t try so hard,” became my new mottos.

In the beginning Kevin wasn’t convinced our family would be able to honor and stick to this new approach, so we didn’t wait for the holiday to come. The room was immediately prepared and the new approach simply flowed into action. We were tested to see if we would keep our end of the bargain, and within a few weeks Kevin seemed less tense during his visits to our home and his medication for tension has been decreased.

It has now been three years since we started our “new tradition” and I am comforted to know he has not had a crisis during the holiday season and/or any other special event. His sisters are thrilled with the new

arrangements; it seems we all enjoy the simpler celebrations. How lucky to have a better time, with less effort!

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*Submitted by Libby Pedrazzani*

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR GETTING THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS : From Contributors Across the Country**

*Contributors: Sara O'Brien, Don F. Looney, Maxine B. Cunningham, Harriet Kronick, Ken B. and Theresa Cunningham*

### **Holiday Time... ARE YOU READY?**

The holidays can be a difficult time for anyone, especially during family gatherings. This difficulty is heightened when you are struggling with mental illness. You may be spending time with people who, although they try their best, do not understand your condition. There are some things that you can do to make this time of year go as smoothly as possible.

### **Control What You Can**

You may not be able to control where the gathering is held; after all, these are often family traditions. You can, however, control how long you plan to stay. Make sure you have your own mode of transportation so that you can leave at a predesignated time or if it becomes an unhealthy environment for you. Please remember that you can always leave a room. Find a quiet spot, even if it is a bathroom, and take a moment to regroup before deciding to leave. Make sure that the anxiety you feel is worth missing out on this time with your loved ones.

### **Take of Yourself**

Do as much as you can to nurture yourself during this time of year: get a massage, meditate, or journal. Find someone in your family that you feel understands your plight and talk to them before the gathering. Allow this person to be a source of support in the midst of the storm. They may be able to act as a shield or distraction during an uncomfortable moment, or be the one who can make you laugh when they see you start to withdraw.

I also have found it comforting to carry something small and reassuring in my pocket or purse. I have used a baby bootie, a small piece of soft fabric, and a pebble at different times. They are easily concealed and can be rubbed or held as sources of self-nurturing or reminders of strength.

### **Celebrate**

The most important thing to remember about the holiday season is that it is a time of celebration. No matter what, do not let fear and anxiety keep you from having a nice memory. We may not all have a “home” or “family” with whom we can feel safe. Feel free to create new traditions

with those with whom you feel comfortable and happy. There is no law that says that you must spend specific days of the years with those related to you by blood. Always remember that you have the right to set boundaries, nurture yourself, and define your own family.

### **Gift Giving**

- Be creative with your gifts.
- If you have a limited budget, make the gifts yourself. You can cook a dish, write a poem, draw pictures, or paint a rock.
- Give gifts that promote wellness and laughter. You can give a tape cassette or CD with soothing music, lotions, soaps, candles; gift certificates such as a massage, manicure or pedicure, a movie or a meal at a favorite restaurant.

### **Holiday Activities**

Involve yourself in free activities if you are on a limited budget. Examples are visits to the library, book store, or museums.

### **Rehearsals and Role Plays**

Sometimes anticipation of difficult events can upset those with mental illness, creating resistance, anxiety, and psychotic symptoms. If you can identify such an event, you can plan for it. Rehearsals and role-playing are useful and sometimes fun. You need to be clear about the problem and have some solutions in mind.

### **Self-Care**

- Get out of the house. Enjoy the sunshine and fresh air.
- Do not dwell on past losses.
- Don't accept the role of victim.
- If partying is your thing, then do it and enjoy it— but do not add alcohol or drugs if possible.
- If partying is not your thing, think about staying home and watching a movie or being with close friends or family in a more comfortable setting.
- Seek out supportive environments and fellowships through NAMI-CARE support groups, First Night Programs and similar activities.
- Don't feel you have to be among the crowds to fully welcome in the New Year. Celebrations are what you make them and how you make them comfortable for you.

## **Perspective About Reducing Stress**

### Stressful

Meet deadlines

Get everything done on time

Complete all preparation tasks

Maintain history of tradition

Always nervous

Everything seems like work

### Less Stress

Deadlines are guidelines only

Enjoyment more important

Go with the flow

Create new traditions

Relax expectations

Have fun

People with any ambivalent feelings about their families, or the way they were raised, will have those feelings more intensely during the holidays. Sometimes we make it harder on ourselves by thinking about celebrations only in terms of the way we did them as children, with our parents.

If spending the whole holiday with family is distressing, maybe it's better to spend part of the holiday with your family and the rest with people you enjoy. Show up for dessert at the family dinner, or just a couple of hours on Christmas, and have a plan for something you will enjoy for the rest of the day.

Some women inherit the role of cooking and cleaning for Christmas and Thanksgiving for all their siblings, nieces and nephews—whether they want the job or not. No law says you have to prepare a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving dinner for your whole family like your mother used to do. If that is a drudge, not a pleasure, take the children to a restaurant or better yet, volunteer with them at a soup kitchen or church outreach to the needy. If the rest of the family truly values that great big family celebration, ask them what they're willing to contribute. Will the men clean the kitchen before peeling off to the football game? If not, no dice.

If alcohol is a problem for some family members that leads to unpleasantness for everyone, then don't invite them, or make them check their liquor at the door. If you need a six-pack to have a good time, have your own party, not at my house.

Anniversaries of a loved one's death might actually be helped by family togetherness. Some brief formal recognition of the loved one is often a good idea. Make your own family tradition. Sing your father's favorite

song, or tell great stories about your mother so the children in the family may get a sense of her. It needn't take more than 10 minutes. And if there is someone in the family who had a special problem with the loved

one—like I did with my grandfather—recognize and validate his experience, and give him the space he needs to deal with those memories and still feel welcome in the family.

If you know a troubling holiday or anniversary is coming up, you can reduce the pressure on yourself by anticipating the increased pressure. Schedule extra visits with your therapist, talk to the doctor about adjusting your meds for awhile, spend more time with supportive people you like, watch your sleeping and eating patterns for changes that might be early warning signs that you're getting off track and symptomatic, increase your daily exercise, and find people who share your memories and validate your experience, positive or negative. Everybody has a relative similar to the one you will be missing.

The main point is that if you don't like the way you've always done the holidays, do them a different way that is more comfortable to you.

*From Ken B. (referencing "No More Holiday Blues" by Dr. Wayne Dyer, 1990.)*

# NAMI PROGRAMS:

## FOR FAMILIES & CAREGIVERS

- **NAMI Family-to-Family:** a free 12-week course for relatives and significant others of individuals with severe mental illnesses. The course discusses the clinical treatment of these illnesses and teaches the knowledge and skills that participants need to cope more effectively.
- **NAMI Family Support Groups:** a 90-minute weekly peer support group for relatives and significant others.
- **NAMI Basics:** a new education program for parents and other kinship caregivers of children living with mental illnesses.

## FOR CONSUMERS

- **NAMI Peer-to-Peer:** a free course for consumers containing individual relapse prevention planning, a debriefing/storytelling week and an advance directive for psychiatric care.
- **NAMI Connection Recovery Support Group:** a 90-minute weekly support group run by persons who live with mental illness for other persons with any diagnosis who also live with mental illness.
- **Healthy Hearts & Minds:** a multimedia program about healthy, accessible and affordable lifestyle changes designed to reduce cardiac risk among people with mental illness.

## FOR PROVIDERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

- **NAMI Ambassadors:** a variety of workshops for community and professional audiences presented by relatives and individuals living with mental illness about: Basics about Mental Illness, Working with Families in Crisis, Children with Behavioral Disorders, What is Recovery? And others.
- **NAMI In Our Own Voice:** a 90-minute interactive, multimedia presentation by individuals with mental illness that offers hope and provides insight into the recovery now possible for people with mental illness.

*The foregoing programs are available in the Baltimore metropolitan area. Check with your state or local NAMI to determine which programs are available in your area. To locate state or local NAMI organizations nationwide, or to receive information from the national NAMI helpline or website, call (800) 950-6264 or go to [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).*



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