

seniors and the holiday blues

The holidays should be a joyful time, but it is not unusual for many of us to feel sad, lonely or even anxious. This condition, known as the “holiday blues,” is most common at the end of the year when it can seem that just about everyone is celebrating in some way, while those with the holiday blues feel overwhelmed by the high expectations of the season.

Seniors can be especially susceptible to the holiday blues. “The holidays can heighten feelings of grief and loss for seniors adjusting to changes related to the process of aging: life without a loved one or close friends, ill health, or a move from a lifelong family home into a retirement home or senior community. They may feel guilty about having feelings of sadness which may in turn intensify those feelings of sadness,” says Karen A. Briskie, RN, MSN, Director of THE MEDICAL TEAM’s Journey Behavioral Health Program.

Experiencing the holiday blues can be a normal response to a stress-filled time but seniors don’t have to suffer unnecessarily. Mental Health America, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping Americans lead mentally healthier lives, offers the following tips for coping with holiday stress:

- Keep expectations manageable. Try to set realistic goals. Make a list and priori-

tize the important activities.

- Don’t put the entire focus on just one day. Remember that it’s a whole season of holiday sentiment, and activities can be spread out to lessen stress and increase enjoyment.
- Remember the holiday season does not banish reasons for feeling sad or lonely; there is room for these feelings to be present, even if the person chooses not to express them.
- Leave “yesteryear” in the past and look toward the future. Don’t set yourself up in comparing today with the “good ol’ days.”
- Do something for someone else. Try volunteering to help others.
- Enjoy activities that are free, such as taking a drive to look at holiday decorations.
- Be aware that excessive drinking will only increase your feelings of depression.
- Try something new. Celebrate the holidays in a new way.
- Spend time with supportive and caring people. Reach out and make new friends, or contact someone you haven’t heard from in a while.
- Find a family member, friend, clergy member, or a physician or professional counselor you can talk with who can help you through this difficult time.

While they may be intense and unsettling, holiday blues are usually short-

lived. “However, it is important for family members, physicians and other caregivers to be alert to signs of something more serious than just seasonal sadness. Many elderly individuals may feel that depression is a natural part of aging and may not seek treatment on their own,” says Karen Briskie, RN, MSN.

Depression is a very real and serious disorder that can be treated and managed, but can be life-threatening if left untreated. Signs of depression include: sadness that won’t lift; loss of interest or pleasure; changes in appetite and weight; and thoughts of death or suicide. If you notice that a loved one seems depressed, encourage them to talk to their health-care provider.

If diagnosed with depression, elderly patients have been found to respond more readily when receiving psychiatric care in the comfort of home, surrounded by their family and possessions. There are specialty in-home care programs, such as THE MEDICAL TEAM’s Journey Behavioral Health program, which can assist patients, families and caregivers affected by depression and other behavioral health disorders to journey towards wholeness.

Source: *Mental Health America*, www.nmha.org