

Happy Holidays? Maybe not

Not everyone is feeling jolly this season

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solution beyond getting through it.

"I may have a glass of wine, maybe I'll cook something; It's tough," Nalbandian explains. "I tell myself, 'It's just one day, it'll pass'."

In general, people love Christmas and they're eager for it to arrive, says Dr. Mark Berber, psychiatrist with Markham Stouffville Hospital.

"No matter what your culture or religion, there's a really good vibe, all about loving and caring and gifts and celebrating."

But the pressure and pop media propaganda can bring the blues - especially in the days between Christmas and New Year's, he says.

Emergency wards and crisis hotlines are surprisingly quiet in the weeks leading up to Dec. 25, but there is a spike in depression and suicide after Christmas Day.

Maybe you've held it together during the busy days of December. Maybe the holiday didn't go as well as you'd hoped, or you're seeing the Visa bills pour in.

"The main problem is expectations," Berber says. "Wanting to fulfill the needs and desires of your children and family members, wanting to give the perfect gift to make everyone happy, trying to recreate the atmosphere of Christmases past, or grandparents wanting to re-live through their grandchildren the pleasant memories of their own children."

Trouble is, we're living in a different world now, with families separated geographically and, sometimes, emotionally.

"I think people can feel overwhelmed and a little stressed out because they

feel memories of Christmas that may have been happier times," says Nancy Lewis, supervisor for Flexible Supports Program with York Support Services Network.

New Canadians can find it difficult to be in an unfamiliar environment, trying to figure out what Christmas in Canada is all about, she adds.

And then there's the news.

"We are all so sadly aware of ongoing disasters happening around the world now," Berber says. "We hear about Syria, the destruction in Aleppo, mass migration from war-torn areas, the Trump campaign and growing intolerance in Europe."

"There is a sense among informed Canadians that it's a risky world, an uneasiness because we are aware 24-7 what's happening globally. We are surrounded by such toxicity at the moment."



Mike Barrett/Metroland

Kim Smith (left) is a client of York Support Services Network. She and her case manager, Becca McLure, find that walks in a peaceful place, like Fairy Lake Park in Newmarket, or coffee at a local cafe can help reduce stress during the holiday season.

add to the challenge, he adds.

"Living is expensive, gifts are expensive. Kids today want high-tech toys and they're not cheap...People want more and more and more."

Kim Smith, 44, is trying not to let money worries get her down.

An alcoholic who has been sober for one year, Smith knows it will be challenging enough to get through the busy party season, but the biggest hurdle, she says, is her limited budget.

The Newmarket resident suffered a stroke several years ago and is making a slow recovery. Money is tight. For gifts, she sticks with inexpensive stores like Giant Tiger or gift certificates at the mall, but she uses a cane for mobility and winter weather makes it tough to get around. At \$10 per trip, cabs are out of reach.

It sure isn't the picture-

Financial constraints

BANISH THE HOLIDAY BLUES

☞ Keep your expectations realistic. Remember the movies and commercials are make-believe. Stay off Facebook if the constant stream of other people's apparent joy makes you feel worse.

☞ Don't get sucked into the competitive nature of gift-giving. Be aware of holiday commercialism and when possible, pay cash.

☞ Show genuine thoughtfulness by giving homemade baked goods or presents, or a gift with meaning - donation in someone's name to United Way York Region, for example.

☞ Old-fashioned Christmas cards have their own special magic, a warmth that doesn't come across in an email. Take the time to reminisce and reconnect.

☞ Focus on rituals. Sing or hum along to favourite Christmas songs. Watch favourite old holiday movies. There is evidence it triggers memories that bring joy.

☞ Holiday meals can be troublesome. Make sure everyone, kids and adults, put away cellphones and devices and focus on connecting.

☞ Walks in York Region forests are free and communing with nature can stave off depression. Exercise can have the same effect.

☞ Get enough rest and eat well. If you slip - which is easy to do in the holidays - don't beat yourself up about it.

☞ Lack of sunlight can cause Seasonal Affective Disorder or the less severe 'winter blues' (fatigue, moodiness, eating and sleeping more). If it interferes with everyday life, investigate lightboxes. Berber recommends Canadian company Day-lights.com

☞ Look for ways to enjoy the holidays for free: Christmas markets, church sales, free community turkey dinners, activities at the local library

☞ Be gentle with yourself. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to say 'no' if you're feeling pressured. Grieving? remember: this too shall pass.

NEED MORE HELP?

Krasman Centre Warm Line (non-crisis support) 1-888-777-0979

Bereaved Families of Ontario & York Region 1-800-969-6904

24-hour crisis support - 310-COPE

perfect Christmas she sees in the commercials and holiday TV shows, but Smith is keeping her chin up. Long baths, walks at Fairy Lake and community activities help, as does steering clear of negative people. The Canadian Mental Health Association and YSSN offer her support and outings, and when stress gets really bad, she has called the 310-COPE crisis line.

It's the busiest time of year for YSSN, Lewis says.

For those who are 'precariously housed', extra hampers from the food bank, Salvation Army drives or festive gift pro-

grams like that at Newmarket High School fill the gaps, but others need more emotional support, she says.

"Stress happens to all of us and it can be good or it can be bad. It's really how we react to it," she says. "Christmas is short. Once the season is over, most people's lives return to normal and we're okay again."

As Nalbandian says, life is full of ups and downs and everyone struggles sometimes.

"If you don't have the bad times, you don't know to appreciate it when times are good."

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