

# MENTAL HEALTH AND THE HOLIDAY BLUES

SPECIAL REPORT - KENOSHA NEWS: BY KAREN MAHONEY

While the holidays are marketed as a time of joy and cheer, high expectations and stress can take both a mental and physical toll, prompting behavior like unhealthy eating, fatigue, outbursts of anger and social withdrawal.

It's particularly tough for those mourning the loss of a loved one, especially when the loss was recent. Lisa Zanin, co-president of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Kenosha and other experts say it's important for those going through a difficult time to know they are not alone.

"The holidays can be a hard time and I think a lot of it is due to expectations of your socializing," she said. "You are supposed to be happy with family and those things aren't happening for you. If you are already dealing with some kind of mental health issue, those symptoms can get worse. It is a vicious circle and it feeds on itself."

Through their website, NAMI Kenosha offers support groups, relevant and helpful information as well as holiday hotlines. They encourage face-to-face meetings as it helps to combat depression and other mental health issues.

"Even if you don't have family present during the holidays, we feel so strongly about people not being alone that we have a holiday party in December and welcome anyone in the community that is dealing with a mental health challenge and their families to come and have lunch with us," said Zanin.

"We put this on at Reuther Central High School on the first Saturday in December. We give gifts of warm hats, gloves and socks. It is free for anyone in the community. All we ask is that when they come to Reuther on Dec. 1, all they need to do is sign their name to keep a count, so we have the numbers. We open our doors at 11 am and begin serving at noon.

NAMI Kenosha is a 5013c organization and receives no tax dollars but instead relies on grants and donations to cover operational expenses. One of their important missions is in offering Crisis In Partners CIP for the community and CIT or Crisis Intervention Team training for police officers to help them better understand how to manage those who have a mental illness.

"We are trying to expand our circle of care so first responders understand about mental illness, such as firefighters, emergency personnel, school staff and people like librarians and others in the public," said Zanin. "Anyone can take the free two-day training classes. NAMI partners with law enforcement and Gateway as well as the grants to fund the programs."

Zanin encourages family members that are witnessing loved ones in crisis, whether they have a diagnosed mental illness or not, to call 911 and specifically ask for a CIP trained officer.

"If there is one on call, hopefully the caller would tell the 911 operator that their loved one may be dealing with a mental health issues, so the officer knows how to de-escalate the situation," said Zanin. "They need to look at body language, avert



Lisa Zanin (left), co-president of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) with a NAMI facilitator.

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their gaze and deal with the person in low tones of voice with calm, simple words. There is so much a trained officer can do in this type of situation."

One key to understanding individuals living with a mental illness is that it is a structural brain disorder that is theorized to be caused by a combination of genetics coupled with environmental issues. Though it is often stigmatized, Zanin wants the public to know that working with mental illness is equally as challenging as it is to deal with physical illnesses and sometimes more difficult due to the complexities of the disease.

"It is a real issue in our society and the statistics bear it out how common it is," she said. "Before my own loved one started to develop a mental illness, they had issues that I didn't understand. But through their illness, I saw the social issues in this country and the issue of homelessness and I get it. It is much more real to me and it makes sense now that so many who are homeless have mental illnesses and addiction. It is often thought that they must have a family and they should just go home, but it is not that easy. I understand that issue as well."

While there is evidence to suggest a genetic component to mental illness, it is a theory that is addressed with caution, admitted Zanin. She adds that there is still much research that needs to be done to find a definitive cause for the one in five that suffer with a mental illness.

"It is a hot topic politically, because it could be considered a pre-existing condition, and socially, it permeates all levels of society. It is also a social injustice as more people go to jail for having a mental illness than are going to a hospital for help," explained Zanin. "This is so different than a physical disease because this disease manifests itself in behavior. It is a very little understood problem, complex and has a lot of self-medication going on in the form of alcohol and drugs. The beginnings of mental illness often start when people are going through puberty

and they wrongly tell themselves that smoking pot or drinking alcohol may calm them down, then it could be the trigger that is making their mental health worse, rather than better."

While all age groups, genders and demographics are affected by mental health issues, especially during the holidays, it is surprisingly white males over age 60 that have the highest rate of suicide.

"These are not the happy golden years for a lot of men and while suicide is the third leading cause of death for young

people, it is the highest among the white men over 60," explained Zanin. "To me, there are also a lot of deaths happening among this age group that we are not understanding are suicide, either. There is some kind of senior depression happening and that may be attributed to genetics and a trigger of environment, or maybe hidden PTSD or an accumulation of loss in life. It is something we need to watch for."

According to NAMI, some of the warning signs of mental health issues:

- Changes in behavior that are severe or out of the ordinary.
- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating or learning

- Prolonged feelings of irritability or anger
- Avoiding friends and social activities
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- Changes in sex drive
- Difficulty perceiving reality
- Abuse of substances like alcohol or drugs

- Thinking or talking about suicide

For more information, visit [namikenosha.org](http://namikenosha.org) or call 262-652-3606

The other option is to call the Crisis Hotline that is open 24/7 in Kenosha: 1-800-236-7188



**Kenosha County**

**Saturday, December 1st**

**Reuther Central High School**

**913 57th St. Kenosha, WI 53140**

**11:00am: Doors Open**

**12:00pm: Lunch is served**

**1:00pm: Meet & Greet SANTAI!**

**Music provided by Lioness Choristers**



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