Mental Health and the Holiday Blues

While the holidays are marketed as a time of joy, high expectations and stress can take both a mental and physical toll, leading to behaviors 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 is recent. Lisa Zanin, co-president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Kenosha, encourages people to remember that it’s okay to lean on each other and to seek help when needed.

“With the holidays come higher expectations, increased stress, and a reminder of what we’re missing,” Zanin said. “It’s important to take care of yourself and reach out for support when you need it.”

Zanin recommends reaching out to NAMI Kenosha for support groups, relevant and helpful information, and holiday hotlines. They also encourage face-to-face meetings to combat depression and other mental health issues.

“During the holidays, NAMI Kenosha offers support groups, relevant and helpful information, as well as holiday hotlines. We encourage face-to-face meetings to combat depression and other mental health issues,” Zanin said.

NAMI Kenosha is a 501c3 organization and receives no tax dollars but instead relies on grants and donations to cover operational expenses. One of their important missions is to offer Crisis Intervention Team training for police officers to help them better understand how to manage those who have a mental illness.

“One key to understanding individuals living with a mental illness is that it’s a structural brain disorder that is theorized to be caused by a combination of genetics, coupled with environmental issues. Though it’s often difficult to decipher the complexities of the disease, there is evidence to suggest a genetic component to mental illness,” Zanin said.

While there is evidence to suggest a genetic component to mental illness, it’s 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 people who suffer with a mental illness.

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 CPI trained officer.

“It’s important to understand that it’s okay to ask for help when you need it,” Zanin said. “NAMI Kenosha is here to support individuals and their families through difficult times.”

The holidays can be a hard time and Zanin said it’s important to remember that it’s okay to lean on each other and to seek support when needed.

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"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 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 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:

- Confused thinking or problems with concentration or learning
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Excessive worrying or fear
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Thinking or acting on dangerous or self-destructive acts
- Feelings of hopelessness or helplessness
- Changes in keeping habits of eating
- Providing friends and social activities
- Protracted feelings of startled or anxious agitation
- Changes in energy, activity or school work
- Changes in mood or behavior
- Difficulty controlling or managing anger
- Having trouble making decisions or solving problems
- Repeated accidents or injuries
- Using alcohol or drugs more than usual
- Withdrawing from social activities and friends
- Not enjoying activities that used to be enjoyable
- Changes in school performance
- Talking about suicide
- Changes in eating or weight

According to namikenosha.org or call 262-652-3606 for more information. Visit the Hotline that is open 24/7 in Kenosha: 1-800-236-7188.