

Keeping the Holiday Spirit Alive Is Up to Us

Not everyone has a Hallmark Christmas.

WebMD's article "[Holiday Depression and Stress](#)" reminds readers that while for most people the holiday season is "a fun time of the year filled with parties, celebrations, and social gatherings with family and friends," for others the holidays can bring "sadness, self-reflection, loneliness, and anxiety."

Some of these maladies, the article notes, stem from longer winter days, fatigue, stress, unrealistic expectations, over-commercialization, and strikingly in this lockdown year of 2020, "the inability to be with one's family and friends." When afflicted with what WebMD calls "stress responses," some individuals may drink or eat too much, suffer from headaches, and develop insomnia.

Bearing in mind that WebMD is addressing holiday depression during a normal year, what additional burdens of sadness and stress will this year of COVID-19 with its masks, social distancing, and lockdowns bring to Americans?

With the holidays now upon us, we're about to find out.

An uptick in the number of cases of coronavirus has some states once again turning to shutdowns and restrictions to fight this disease. In "More governors issue coronavirus restrictions ahead of Thanksgiving amid calls to downsize gatherings," Tyler Olson [reports](#) that officials are mandating the number of people who can attend a particular gathering – Oregon, for example, "banned indoor gatherings larger than six people from more than two different households" – and are again closing businesses and restaurants.

Some of these orders are either unenforceable or ludicrous. Pennsylvania has issued a mandatory mask order, including the wearing of masks in private homes, Ohio is closing retail establishments between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m., and Minnesota has banned citizens from “outdoor recreational activities where they will come into close proximity with others from different households.”

Dr. Tom Frieden, a former director of the Center for Disease Control, [supports](#) some of these restrictions, telling a television audience, “Unless we change our Thanksgiving plans, we are going to have a very unmerry Christmas.”

At this point, given what authorities and the virus have done to Thanksgiving, a good number of us are already expecting a “very unmerry Christmas.” Office parties will be cancelled, churches will remain closed or operate at limited capacity, large gatherings will be discouraged or illegal, and Santa Claus will be in quarantine lest he spread the virus around the globe.

The effects of this pandemic on our mental health are both dire and hidden. In his article “Lockdowns Are Serial Killers. End Them Now,” David Solway [points to the](#) underreported fear, stress, and depression felt by so many Americans. Here he cites as one source psychiatrist Mark McDonald:

Not only have Americans become afraid, they have become infected by ... a pandemic of hysteria ... a delusional psychosis. A delusion is a fixed false belief contrary to reality. Americans today believe that we must keep our businesses closed, that we must keep our children at home, that we must wear masks over our faces and isolate ourselves from human beings in order to keep us alive. That is false. That is a lie. And it is killing us. It is killing us physically, mentally, socially, psychologically, it is killing our country, and it must stop.

Most of us know family members or friends who are depressed or saddened by this pandemic. Add to this scenario the usual holiday blues, and we have a mental health disaster in the making.

WebMD offers a list of remedies for the downside of the holidays such as setting realistic expectations, paying attention to the money spent on gifts, “live and enjoy the present,” and if you are lonely, volunteer for a charity or reach out to friends.

All of these suggestions are laudable, but in this particular holiday season I would add one more item to that list. We should all try to become acutely aware that many people around us feel isolated, discouraged, and afraid of the future. They may keep those thoughts locked in their hearts, but they are as lonely as a castaway on a desert island.

When we understand the extent of this widespread gloom, we can help fight against it by spreading goodwill in whatever way we can. We can greet that barista in the coffee shop with a smile and a “Merry Christmas,” we can call friends more frequently with the deliberate intention of bringing cheer rather than complaint to the conversation, we can go the extra mile to help those who are in need, and we can share with others our sense of joy and gratitude even if we must at times fake those feelings.

When we offer encouragement to others, we are secretly offering it to ourselves as well.

And what could be better than that?

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