

Features

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****Holiday season holds special
depression hazard for elderly

DALLAS -- Holiday blues are a seasonal hazard for almost anyone, but a Dallas researcher says that older people are especially vulnerable.

Aging brings its own special stresses that may lead to depression, especially during the winter holidays, said Dr. Myron Weiner, professor and vice chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. He is also geropsychiatric consultant at Zale Lipshy University Hospital at Southwestern Medical Center.

The psychiatrist explained that many older people have lost their spouses -- and sometimes their children, too. Because winter holiday celebrations often center around families and memories of happy family gatherings in the past, the absence of these loved ones may bring on feelings of sadness and depression or even trigger intense grief reactions.

One older woman, for example, suddenly burst into tears in the middle of a happy gathering of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Only a moment before she had been having a wonderful time. "You'll never know how cruel it is to outlive your children," sobbed the woman, who had lost her three daughters when they were in their 50s.

People are never too old to miss their own parents even though

(More)

they may have died decades ago, Dr. Weiner continued. And because many of their happiest memories of their parents may be associated with Christmas or Hanukkah, celebrations with their children or grandchildren may make them acutely aware of their loss.

Getting older also brings other kinds of losses, the psychiatrist pointed out. As we age, for example, we lose some of our physical capabilities. Older people in general have more sensory impairment, especially loss of hearing. Not being able to hear well adds to an older person's frustration, as do mobility problems. Using a walker or wheelchair is both tiring and frustrating and makes visiting during the holidays and attending seasonal events and parties difficult.

Some older people get depressed, Dr. Weiner said, because they are no longer able to "run the show." They may be accustomed to being the "parents" and having all the "children" celebrate the holidays at their homes. Preparing the traditional family feast may be a custom they've always looked forward to. Now perhaps they can no longer manage it and may instead find themselves guests in their own childrens' homes.

Lack of money is another problem that can give senior citizens the blues as the holidays approach, the psychiatrist pointed out. Most older people are living on much less than they did before retirement, and the older they get, the more their buying power shrinks as the cost of living rises. At the same time, they may have more gifts to buy if their children now have children of their own. And rarely are they able to give the kind of gifts they once could.

However, there are ways older people can combat holiday depression, said Dr. Weiner. He offered the following tips to make the holidays brighter for senior citizens and their families:

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- * Families should encourage positive reminiscing. It's good to relive old memories together in a circle of warmth and love.

- * Family gatherings are a good time to bring out old scrapbooks and photo albums. Looking through them will help rekindle happy memories in the older folks while giving the youngsters a sense of family history and a feeling for relatives they may have never known.

- * Everyone should try to be with people who are cheerful and supportive -- but this can be especially critical for older people during the holidays. It's a good idea to invite upbeat people over during this season even if it's just for a cup of coffee.

- * On the other hand, stay away from situations that have proven painful in the past or remembrances that you know may trigger grief. If a holiday service reminds you of the funeral of a loved one because it's in the same place, it would be better not to go than to be overwhelmed with depression.

- * Be realistic in planning a reasonable level of activity. Fatigue can feed depression.

- * Enjoy food and alcohol in moderation. Overeating may cause indigestion; if you're feeling physically unwell, you're more likely to get "down." As for alcohol, not only does overindulgence lead to injuries, but many people tend to have morbid thoughts when they've been drinking. And hangovers are guaranteed to depress you as well as make you ill.

- * Finally, keep in mind that holidays do not have to be sad times even if there are losses associated with them. Memories are one way of bringing texture and depth to our lives.

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