



Tis the Season? Tips for Surviving the Holiday Blues

We have all heard about the holiday blues. We are well into the depths of winter with less daylight and more treacherous snow-packed travel conditions. We fear being trampled by a herd of shoppers at the malls and grocery stores. And how are we going to pull off hosting a successful holiday dinner or showing up at a friend's house with the perfect hostess gift?

But those of us who work with students in schools and colleges, we have become well aware of the impact of the holidays for children and young adults. Much like the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on the growing prevalence of mental health distress in this country, the holidays this year seem to amplify the level of emotional distress for those who are already struggling, particularly our youth. Children are showing up in [emergency rooms at hospitals](#) for suicidal thoughts in record numbers. Researchers in a study by the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) found a significant connection between recent increases of suicide rate with mental health workforce shortages following the pandemic. By 2020, the [CDC](#) reported that suicides for children ages 10-14 was the second leading cause of death for children ages 10-14 and the third leading cause of death for youth ages 15-24. We all know that suicide has always been a complicated and present issue for today's youth. But with the recent cluster of U.S. mass shootings, including the [anti-LGBTQ shooting](#) in Colorado Springs, children everywhere are feeling more vulnerable than ever.

So, what can educators in K-12 and IHE systems do to buffer against this tide of psychological turmoil? How can schools and colleges address the collision of holiday stress and the media coverage of violence on the news? Here are some basic tips that educational institutions can offer this holiday season:

Make Healthy Choices. Right now, it is helpful in our communications to practice and model basic healthy habits; like eating right, getting plenty of sleep, and staying hydrated. Recreational indulgences (like thrill seeking, alcohol and other substance use) should be avoided or done in moderation, and we need to practice basic safety strategies, like never walking home at night alone or without a phone.

Limit Media Exposure. Every newsfeed or social network post seems to be peppered with images of grief-stricken communities, violent shootouts, and war-ravaged countries. Schools and colleges that give parents and educators permission to turn off their screens is an act of practicing wellness right now. While it is important to stay informed, limit how much of these stories and images that you take in per day. Designate news and screen-free hours at home. And by all means, make sure that children are only exposed to information and videos that are age and developmentally appropriate. Engage youth about these stories and separate the facts from the sensationalized rumors. Finally, balance the negativity in the media with more life-affirming video experiences, such as *It's A Wonderful Life* or *Wakanda Forever*.

Gather with Family (or your "Chosen" Family). Indeed, holidays are a time to be with loved ones. For most people, we turn to family for comfort, stability, and celebration. But as a presenter recently reminded us, sometimes contact with family can be more traumatic than helpful. Some folks may need to be with their "chosen" family instead, like friends or mentors that are not blood relatives but supportive, significant others in their lives. These are the times when connecting with others who fuel us rather than emotionally drain us can be a very nurturing practice.





Provide Mental Health and Other Resources. There are situations and moments when our social and family connections do not adequately support our needs to stay safe and healthy. Educational systems can remind their communities that support students in school settings like our own [CSSRC](#) or anonymous tip lines like [Safe2Tell](#), crisis hotlines like [Colorado Crisis Services](#), and national supports like [988 LIFELINE](#) and of course, 911. Other state resources like [iMatter](#) and [Second Wind](#) are wonderful free mental health services for youth in need. The [Trevor Project](#) and [Trans Lifeline](#) are excellent resources for the LGBTQ community. And for communities of color, there is the [Denver Foundation](#) for access to local translated and culturally responsive mental health support, and The University of Denver has a nice [online guide](#) to local and national resources for BIPOC college-age students.

Give Grace to Others. Many believe that the true spirit of the holiday season can be best enjoyed by giving to others. Sometimes the biggest gift that schools and colleges can offer their communities is a time to listen and consider different perspectives of individuals who are going through hard times. Families celebrate different holidays, they occupy different places of worship (if at all), and they have been through personal challenges that we may have no grasp of understanding. No doubt, the “holiday blues” look different for [Black](#), [LGBTQ](#), and other [BIPOC](#) communities. [CU Denver](#) reminds us that all the holiday references and commercials depicting two-parent nuclear families gathering around a festive feast does not fit everyone’s lived experiences, and those stereotypical images may make this time that much harder for those who suffer from seasonal affective disorder or increased isolation. School psychologists, social workers, and counselors frequently see an increase in mental health visits and emergencies this time of year, because this season for some only reminds them of what is missing or trigger something traumatic in their lives. While we often cannot “fix” the various hardships that individuals are going through this time of year, we *can* demonstrate grace by taking extra time to understand the unique circumstances of people in distress, and not add to their burden in areas that we do have control – like remembering that we don’t all celebrate the same holidays, by supporting the shortening of academic assignments, refraining from expecting new learning, or delaying the roll out of another initiative until the new calendar year.

By practicing these tips for the holiday season or our students and those who support them, we can help to support all of our stakeholders in the community during what can be for some a very stressful time. This effort can be regardless of whether or not they join us in a chorus of singing carols, wear ugly holiday sweaters, or indulge us by drinking a cup of eggnog.

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