

'Tis the Season for Depression

Post holiday is when most dangers lurk

BY CHARITY PRATER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

'Tis the season for parties, festivities, family gatherings and also for depression. While television relentlessly echoes Christmas melodies and the smells of smoked ham concentrate amongst chilled winter neighborhoods, many people aren't feeling the joys of the holiday season.

From dealing with complicated relation-

Vincent hospitals, says that there are basically two kinds of holiday depression. There are people that experience a mild depression during the holidays and there are people who experience a more severe and dangerous depression.

"The holidays bring about many mixed emotions," says Ozer, "While the holidays emphasize feelings of loneliness and depression they also bring out a temporary feeling of renewed hope through television ads and the New Year celebration. However, once the New Year is over, January looms, bringing on the most worrisome symptoms of post-holiday depression."

As people struggle to keep up with shopping, cooking, family get-togethers and financial obligations, they are experiencing the pressure to deliver during the holidays.

Post-holiday sadness is common after the New Year when people realize that the resolutions they made the previous year weren't suc-

ceeded, coupled with the disappointment of the holiday season.

During the month of January, as the holidays come to an end and many people expectations are not met, depression sky-



PHOTO BY CHARITY PRATER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

It's not always easy to feel the joys of the holiday season. Experts say celebrations during Christmas and the New Year can bring renewed hope, but can also be exhausting and stressful.

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-- Harris S. Matarazzo, mental health expert and attorney

ships within mixed families to working December budgets to exhaustion, thousands of people struggle with depression and stress during the most festive time of year.

Herbert Ozer, the director of operations for Behavioral and Mental Health Services at Providence Portland and Providence Saint

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rockets. January is the month that has the highest successful and attempted suicide rates in the nation.

"We see the crisis hotlines peak massively right after the New Year's," says Ozer.

Harris S. Matarazzo is a self-employed local attorney that specializes in mental health issues. He agrees that not only do financial restraints, over-commercialization, personal loss and other variables increase depression symptoms at this time of year, but if someone is prone to depression the holidays can significantly magnify the effect.

"Many people think that if someone has depression that they can just snap out of it and there is a huge stigma attached to suffering from it," says Matarazzo. "Some of my clients would rather admit to having HIV, then admit that they suffer from depression."

Alcohol, narcotics and excessive eating also greatly contribute to the common symptoms of depression sufferers.

"Adding a depressant or a stimulant into a depressive equation only makes the symptoms increase," says Matarazzo. "And overeating makes people depressed and generally feel physically terrible as well."

Ironically, the most common resolution for New Year's is to lose weight, while resolutions to stop drinking or discontinue drug use are among the top 10.

"It's not as easy to keep resolutions as it is to say you'll keep them," says Ozer. "It helps if people allow themselves to accept the fact that they may not be able to achieve goals that they may have planned on."

Ozer says that excessive drinking and eating often mask a

person's holiday blues, and as the New Year comes and passes many people find it difficult to stop self-medicating which can lead to suicidal thoughts and intense depression.

It's common for people to not realize that they are suffering from holiday depression symptoms and struggle to decide if it's simply the holiday blues or if they are suffering from a dangerous mood change.

Matarazzo runs into many people who have mood shifts during the winter months. "If someone is feeling down but it is not affecting their sleep, work or general day to day life then it's probably not that severe. However, if they think something is seriously wrong then they should take action," he says.

People should attempt to recognize the warning signs of severe depression.

"When patients describe how they are feeling they usually choose really vague or general words to express their emotions," says Ozer. "People mostly choose to use words like sadness, loneliness, sleeplessness, exhaustion and lack of appetite."

The most common symptoms of depression are energy loss, sleeplessness, lack of appetite and a general feeling of unhappiness.

He says one in five people will suffer from major depression at least once in their life. Oregon and the Pacific Northwest have a higher depression rate than other parts of the country. Some suspect it's due to the large amount of darkness and rain during the winter months.

There are warning signs for people that are more susceptible to dangerous depression such as those that may be isolated, have no family, have suffered from a traumatic event or have mental

health problems.

Ozer recommends to people who think they may be suffering from depression to consult a doctor who can evaluate and treat the symptoms. Emergency crisis hotlines are also available for people who need immediate help.

Crisis counselors make a plan for the callers that can involve an immediate intervention or introduction of available services that offer help.

Multnomah County crisis line is 503-988-4888 and the Washington County crisis line is 503-291-9111. Both are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

