



Sachi A. Hamai
Chief Executive Officer

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
Department of Mental Health
550 S. Vermont Avenue
Los Angeles, California 90020



Jonathan E. Sherin, M.D., Ph.D.
Director

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CONTACT: Kathleen Piché
213-738-3700
kpiche@dmh.lacounty.gov
Hiu Chung So
213-351-5297
hso@dmh.lacounty.gov

SIMPLE STEPS FOR OPTIMIZING HOLIDAY WELLBEING

Los Angeles, CA – The holiday season is a special and for many, a sacred time known for bringing communities, families and individuals together to celebrate. Many also use the New Year to set positive goals and embark in new directions. But for others, the holiday routine becomes a time of deep and painful self-reflection marked by disturbing experiences past, troubling circumstances present and dashed hopes for the future, resulting in a stressful and re-traumatizing time that feeds negativity and reinforces a vicious cycle of despair.

Most vulnerable are those who have experienced significant trauma, a phenomenon that comes in many forms such as:

- impoverishment and/or neglect
- physical and/or sexual violence
- verbal and/or emotional abuse
- exploitation and/or bullying
- natural and/or man-made environmental disaster
- exposure to war and/or terrorism

Regardless of type, being a victim of trauma, whether it involves singular, multiple, or chronic contact with the toxicities of life, can promote and stabilize patterns of anxiety and depression that (re) emerge in response to stress.

According to a survey by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 64% of those with a history of mental illness reported that the holidays worsen existing conditions and, more specifically, that those with trauma tend to isolate themselves more so than usual. According to the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH), timely recognition and proactive approaches can play a significant role in helping to make the holiday season more enjoyable, if not more tolerable, and to minimize suffering otherwise.

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Notable signs and symptoms include:

- Recalling negative thoughts or experiences in association with the holidays.
- Persistent mood swings or feelings of sadness, anxiety, guilt or irritability.
- Loss of motivation or energy, a change in sleep habits or appetite.
- Social isolation, tobacco, drug and alcohol consumption.

Here are some helpful management strategies:

- Make time for your loved ones, especially children during the hustle and bustle of the holidays.
- Interact with others whether they are family, friends or simply those you can engage.
- Find a positive thing today that will make you smile and/or laugh.
- Take time to remember positive, reinforcing experiences or times in the past.
- Make reasonable holiday expectations to avoid being disappointed or resentful.
- Minimize holiday “duties” such as gift shopping and entertaining to avoid stress.
- Plan ahead when possible to minimize the stress linked with last-minute activities.
- Get exercise, eat healthfully, and avoid heavy consumption of alcohol and other risky behaviors.
- Disengage from situations that cause conflict, resentment or anxiety.

Most importantly:

- Share negative thoughts or feelings with others so they can try to offer support.
- Seek professional help if you or a loved one is feeling overwhelmed with negativity.

“Discussing the experience of suffering in open ways needs to be encouraged,” advises Jonathan Sherin, M.D., Ph.D., the new Director of LACDMH. “Reach out to those who appear to be suffering, even if that suffering is denied at first. At the end of the day, what each of us needs, and trauma victims all the more, is a life filled with purposeful, meaningful activity as well as an enduring sense of belonging. This includes having stable relationships with family, involvement with community and society, and a place in the world that is trusting and safe.”

Dr. Sherin continues, “The cure to suffering in isolation, whether during the holiday or not, is cultural. It ultimately rests in the creation of a strong community fabric that by its very nature spreads knowledge about mental illness, supports regular forums for honest and empathic dialog, and provides opportunities for each of us to help out through intentional civic engagement. Together, we can weave that fabric in order to fortify and sustain a connected Los Angeles County. Let us make this holiday a time to reach out to, communicate with and learn from each other as human beings. In fact, we should all make it part of our daily life.”

County residents are invited to call LACDMH’s 24/7 ACCESS Hotline at (800) 854-7771 to receive help and support during the holiday and year-round. Additional resources for help include:

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services <http://www.didihirsch.org>
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention <http://www.afsp.org>
Trevor Project <http://www.trevorproject.org>
National Alliance on Mental Illness <http://www.nami.org>

About Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health

The Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health is the largest county-operated mental health department in the United States. It operates programs and delivers services at over 300 sites across the County in partnership with a range of County departments, cities, schools and courts as well as through contracts with more than 1,000 organizations and individual practitioners. On average, over 250,000 County residents with mental illness are served annually in accord with the Department's mission: to support the recovery, reintegration and resiliency of our most vulnerable and at risk populations.

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