

Therapists are frequently questioned about the effect of the Christmas holiday on mental health emergencies. It makes sense, of course, when I think of how nuts I feel after a week of extended family.

Holiday stress is certainly no laughing matter. For many, Christmas represents a time of hardship: emotionally, financially and physically. For those without family or friends, Christmas magnifies the sense of isolation. Those with financial hardship can find gift giving and Santa lists burdensome. The energy spent to host large social gatherings often requires a vacation after the vacation.

Given that depression impacts much of the population at any given time, one would expect that the Christmas season would contribute to an increase in suicide rates.

On the contrary! A 1987 study reviewed 188,047 suicides between 1973-1979. The results indicated certain holidays, including Christmas, had a below average frequency rate immediately before, during and after the holiday. Obviously these individuals did not spend Christmas with my family.

Other holidays with below average frequency rates included Memorial Day and Thanksgiving. Almost all demographic groups experienced a low risk of suicide around the holidays: whites, blacks, males, females, retired persons and persons of working age.

Interestingly, certain holidays had a below average rate before the holiday, but above average immediately following. These holidays included New Year's Day, 4th of July and Labor Day.

For those with alcohol dependence, the occurrence of suicide was higher during the two days after the holiday. The report referenced alcohol withdrawal as being a significant contributor to the deaths.

Additionally, studies indicate mental health emergencies drop during the month of December. Apparently, the holiday season promotes resiliency, even in those suffering from severe depression.

As New Year's comes and goes, please be mindful of those in your life who may be at higher risk for self-harm, especially those who abuse alcohol. While we may not impact national statistics, prevention in our communities will save all of us a lot of heartbreak.