

Mistletoe, carols, pretty ribbon and bows; the holiday season has arrived. For many this is a month of excitement and joy. Shopping, wrapping beautiful gifts, preparing cookies and eggnog, decorating the tree and planning for Santa makes this time of year special for thousands.

Unfortunately, this is also the season that reminds others just how miserable they really are. Perhaps they have lost someone special during the year and this is their first Christmas without them; the economic crisis may have resulted in loss of one's home, vehicle, insurance, etc.

Others might find Christmas is the trigger to memories of family violence, sexual abuse or addiction problems. These are the individuals who dread Thanksgiving being over, and breathe a sigh of release once the New Year has begun.

With the chaos of the season, depressive symptoms can easily be overlooked, within ourselves and in those we love. Irritability may be a normal response to dealing with visiting in-laws, or it may be a symptom of declining mental health. Difficulties falling and staying asleep can easily be blamed on the rush of activities. Insomnia, however, is a piece of the depression puzzle as well.

Other symptoms of depression include the loss of energy, loss of motivation to engage in activities previously enjoyed, feelings of excessive and inappropriate guilt (keeping in mind some people should feel guilty about the ugly moose sweaters they wrap up for family members), difficulties concentrating, thoughts of death and weight and appetite changes.

Weight gains can appear to be the result of holiday snacks, big feasts of high fat side dishes and stocking candy. However, if one's weight continues to increase following the holiday, it may yet be another symptom indicating depression. Loss of appetite and weight loss are also symptoms.

Whether the season is one of enjoyment or misery for you, take notice of any changes to the following: appetite, weight, mood, energy, concentration, sleep patterns, guilt, feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of death. Don't be afraid to ask a family member about other symptoms if you witness a change in them.

Remind yourself and others depression is a common disorder that can be easily treated. Early symptom identification can prevent a lapse into a complete depressive episode.

Well wishes to all of you through this time of year. May you avoid ugly sweaters, evil in-laws and bad fruit cake.