

shalem *Digest*

Fall 2016

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FRIENDS OF SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

When the Holidays are Hard

BY SUSAN WINTER FLEDDERUS

For many people, holidays like Christmas are a time of joy, connection and celebration. But let's face it, not everyone likes Christmas. Whether it is your friend, your loved one, your neighbour, or even you yourself, there are some who are finding Christmas hard this year.

Some people dread the annual event, with carols that trigger painful memories rather than good cheer, and family gatherings that are more distressing than joyful.

For some, this holiday season will be the first one they experience after the death of a loved one. These first holidays have their own unique experience of fresh pain and a renewed sense of loss with each family ritual, from the memories evoked by the ornaments as they

are unpacked, to the empty chair at the holiday dinner table. Some people find that it gets easier to deal with the grief year after year, but others find that the second, third, or twelfth Christmas after the loss of a loved one is just as painful.

Similarly, the first Christmas after a separation, divorce or other significant loss or change in a family can be equally difficult. Memories of previous holidays when the

family was still together only highlight how different this year's holidays will be.

And going through the holidays with a terminal illness—your own, or that of someone you love—carries another unique experience: the bittersweet joy of being together while recognizing that this may be your last Christmas together.

For others, every holiday season is difficult. Christmases might be laced with triggers that evoke memories of past family trauma or abuse, or they might be current minefields of family conflict. For some, they are both.

Some people don't have close or meaningful relationships with their families, or have been emotionally cut off for years. Loneliness can be particularly difficult to cope with during a season that seems to emphasize family ties and togetherness.

Even for relatively healthy families, there are challenges of trying to meet everyone's expectations, juggling schedules of several households, and the stress of trying to find gifts that give just as much "wow" as last year, never mind dealing with the relative who tends to drink too much.

And the financial stresses that many experience at this time of year can be particularly painful for those who had a recent job loss or unexpected expenses.

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE HOLIDAYS

For those dealing with anxiety, depression, eating disorders or other emotional or mental health problems, the stresses of the holidays ▶



► can sometimes intensify the symptoms.

When depression steals the pleasure out of everyday life, it can be even more discouraging to face holiday rituals and activities that are supposed to be joyous, but feel flat and empty this year. Depression saps energy and motivation, making it hard to get going on holiday preparations and visits. It is painful and tiring to put on false cheer that hides one's longing to be alone in bed. And trying to find cheerful things to write in greeting cards is enough to trigger tears.

Anxiety can show up in many different ways during the holidays. It might make visits, parties, or church services agonizing for someone with social anxiety. Those who fear driving or flying might find extra traveling during the holidays leaves them irritable and exhausted as they white-knuckle through each trip. And those with general anxiety find themselves with many more issues and details

to obsess over during the busy days of the season.

Those dealing with eating disorders might find themselves dreading the calorie-laden feasts, the ubiquitous boxes of chocolates at the office, and the constant urgings to have larger servings or second helpings. Planning how to avoid taking in food or how to purge it later can preoccupy hours of thought. And then there is the challenge of responding to all the relatives who haven't seen you for months, but feel entitled to comment about your body size or changes in weight.

And how ironic that Seasonal Affective Disorder, which makes dealing with the darker, shorter days of winter hard, would be tightening its grip during the holiday season.

Despite the happy front we put on, for many of us, the holidays are actually rather challenging, if not downright dreadful.

COPING AT CHRISTMAS

So what helps, when the holidays are hard rather than happy? That might be different for each person, depending on their situation, needs and personality. Each of us needs a personalized plan for intentionally addressing the hazards of the holidays and adding layers of self-care. Here are four categories of strategies that you might want to draw from.

Keeping things the same

Part of what makes the holidays special are those annual rituals, events and symbols that add meaning and connection. Whether lighting advent candles, or trekking out to find a tree every year, it can be helpful to keep the traditions alive even if you have to push yourself to participate.

Similarly, daily routines such as consistent mealtimes, bedtimes and regular exercise help stabilize our moods and emotions, and are particularly important to keep up during the holidays, which is when we are most likely to let them go.

Changing things up

This year might be the time to start new traditions and rituals that reflect the new family realities, or your changing personal needs. For example, you might find a way to remember those who can't be with you by adding a special ornament to the tree, or arranging a visit to the cemetery.

Sometimes doing good self-care over the holidays requires changing some long-held traditions. Maybe instead of spending three days sleeping over at the in-laws and enduring conflict and tension, you plan a one day visit. Or, perhaps this is the year to skip the painful visits all together and book a ski holiday instead.

Finding new ways to add meaning to the holidays might include serving Christmas dinner at a homeless shelter, or buying goats or chickens from World Vision for those in need rather than fruitlessly shopping for gifts for relatives who already have everything.

This year, you might find yourself reflecting on different aspects of the Christmas story. In happier years past, the joy of Jesus' birth might have been central to your celebration. But if this year, joy feels out of reach, perhaps you

might find yourself drawn to other elements of the Christmas story. You might experience the waiting and longings of the advent season, or be struck by the poverty and alienation of the Holy Family in the stable, or resonate with the Holy Family's anxious flight into Egypt. Authentic spiritual experiences that reflect the reality of our circumstances and emotional states can be far more healing than faking or avoiding them altogether.

Disconnecting

When the busyness gets to be too much or the social obligations too intense, it can be helpful to build in ways and times of slowing down or being alone. Pacing oneself can make anxiety or depression more manageable during the holidays. Planning exit strategies such as traveling with a second vehicle are vital so you can react when family tensions rise or when anxiety becomes heightened.

Ensuring that there is down-time that refreshes might mean getting into nature for a hike or cross-country skiing. Planning some time to retreat, or adding spiritual practices such as daily advent readings can help you build in personal time for reflecting and replenishing your emotional and spiritual resources.

Connecting

When things are hard, isolation can make

things even worse, particularly during the holidays. Many people recognize the value of finding at least one person who gets it; who understands at least a bit of what they are going through. Being able to be emotionally honest and authentic with your immediate family or a close friend can help, particularly if you feel the need to paste on a smile for others. Planning ahead to schedule a tea with a friend or a session with a therapist can ensure you have support in place for key times or events.

Connecting with your values, your faith, and the reason for the season can help you clarify what you want or don't want to include in your experience of Christmas this year.

With some planning, intentional adjustments, and lavish doses of self-care, holidays like Christmas can include moments of joy, connection and celebration, even for those who find the holidays hard. ◀

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Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

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Supporting a friend or loved one who is finding the holidays hard

- 1) Accept their feelings without dismissing them or spreading false cheer. Acknowledge that there are legitimate reasons the holidays are hard for them.
- 2) Use language that separates the person from the problem. For example, instead of criticizing them for skipping the party, acknowledge that it is the anxiety that is making it hard for them to go.
- 3) Talk about it. Take some time to listen to what feels hardest about the holidays, and then help them to brainstorm about ways to change or cope with those things.
- 4) Plan ahead. Collaborate together to ensure there are resources, down time, exit plans or other strategies in place.
- 5) If you are concerned they are not coping well, help them access resources such as their family doctor, a counsellor, distress line, or hospital emergency room. If they are a member of a church that uses Shalem's Congregational Assistance Plan, encourage them to call Shalem at 1.866.347.0041 for free, anonymous counselling from a local, Master's degree-level Christian psychotherapist.



WE'RE MOVING!

AN AMAZING GIFT!

In early 2016 a faithful Shalem supporter approached us and said that he or she would like to facilitate Shalem owning its own office space in Hamilton. This was an incredibly generous offer, and it took our breath away! It is a real affirmation of Shalem's work. And it was a response to real need: because of our growth, we have an office space issue. Our current office space has served us well, but it is getting too crowded, and parking remains a significant issue, both for people accessing Shalem's services and for staff.

We expect to move in early 2017. (Until we move, our current space is fully functional!) The building is located at 875 Main Street East.

Please celebrate with us this extraordinary, beautiful partnership and breathtaking gift!

There are 8 free parking spots in addition to easily accessible free street parking nearby. The building is about twice our current square footage. The Lease to Own Agreement assures us of occupancy cost certainty over time—our total outlay for rent and utilities will remain what it presently is. And each year a portion of our rent will go into a fund which will build up over time to, along with a capital fundraising campaign, support Shalem's eventual purchase of the building from the donor.

This new Head Office space will also complement our small office in the Durham Region.

Watch for more announcements as we get closer to moving in, including plans for an Open House and Dedication!

It is a warm space, and we look forward to warmly inviting you there!

Upcoming Events

FEBRUARY 23 - 25, 2017

FaithCARE Training: *Learning How to Grow Restorative Congregations*, in partnership with Jubilee Christian Reformed Church, St. Catharines, ON.

MARCH 3, 2017

LGBTQ+ and Mental Health
Mississauga, ON

APRIL 25- 27, 2017

FaithCARE Training: *Learning How to Grow Restorative Congregations*, in partnership with Eastern Canada District, Christian and Missionary Alliance, in Ajax, ON.

Contact our office for more information and to register!

{ DIRECTOR'S CORNER }



**MARK
VANDER VENNEN,**
MA, M.ED, R.S.W.
Executive Director

THE “PROFESSIONALIZATION OF CARE”

Dear Friends of Shalem,

A number of years ago I was asked to give a talk about “what keeps me awake at night”. I said that what keeps me awake at night is something I call “the professionalization of care”. For the last number of decades, as a society we have tended to offload our responsibility to care for those who are most vulnerable to the professionals. The impact has been to simultaneously overburden the professional sector (which is now plagued by lengthy waiting lists and funding short-falls) and disempower communities. As community members we tend to defer to the “experts”, such as doctors and psychiatrists.

One senses the beginning of this development in this painting, “Science and Charity”.

Do you recognize the artist? It is none other than Pablo Picasso, who painted this at the ripe age of 16.

Picasso’s painting depicts a late nineteenth century scene: a woman appears to be gravely ill. She is looking at a nun who offers her a drink and may be holding her child. A doctor, who is looking away, is reading her pulse in relation to the ticking of a stopwatch. There is no interaction between the two caregivers, or between the woman on the bed and the doctor.

Today, the relationship between the two sectors represented in the painting—informal care provided by the community and by loved ones; and care provided by professionals—is rife with mutual suspicion and is not very functional. In fact, often today they are no longer even in the same room together. Yet one has the sense that neither professionals nor communities on their own can effectively provide care for the most vulnerable in our society. Professional involvement tends to be time-limited and mandate-driven, and the outcomes with complex needs are not strong. Community involvement needs some organization and some injection of expertise, or it can cause more harm. But *together*—integrated within a new, much different relationship than we see in this painting—perhaps they could

be truly effective.

How do we get there? Professionals need to learn how to embed themselves in communities—a more difficult task than we might like to think. And communities need to step up and assume their rightful responsibilities to care for their most vulnerable members.

Everything that we do at Shalem is a demonstration project in a new, different, more integrated relationship between communities and the professional mental health sector, as a way of living out the Gospel in mental health. In *WrapAround*, communities wrap themselves around people with simultaneous, multiple, complex needs. In *Restorative Practice*, people in workplaces, schools, churches assume responsibility for their own relational practice. In the *Congregational Assistance Plan (CAP)*, churches and schools provide for mental health care for their members. In our attachment counselling work, foster and adoptive parents are positioned as key members of the treatment team. In *RE-create*, artists link with at-risk street-involved youth to create hope for a better future. And in programs like *The Gathering Place* in Durham, community members surround people with psychiatric diagnoses with community and care.

Developing a new, different relationship between professionals and communities is Shalem’s niche. It’s what makes us unique. It’s proving to be extraordinarily fertile, garnering the partnerships of some of the best professionals in the mental health field and of many, many vibrant communities. And it is having a real impact on people’s lives.

This is exciting work. And you are making it possible with your prayers, partnerships and donations. As a Board and Staff, we are extremely grateful to you and to God for the privilege of being engaged in this meaningful ministry. Please do continue to give. And may God bless you in all that you do in your environments to support people who are vulnerable.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Mark', written in a cursive, flowing style.



Science and Charity, 1897 © Picasso Estate / SODRAC (2016)