

TIPS FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON



The holidays are just as difficult for friends and family members of someone with mental illness. Family members may struggle to balance the needs of their relative with a mental illness with the desires of other relatives and friends. Here are some tips to help cope at this time of year.

If your friend or relative with an illness has religious delusions (for example, thinks he is Jesus, Allah, or Joan of Arc), holiday seasons connected to religious holidays will make those thoughts increase. For example, if he thinks he is Jesus, you may want to consider several options:

- not displaying a Nativity scene,
- not encouraging church attendance by the person with the mental illness, or
- not reading the Bible in his presence.

If your friend or relative with mental illness has constant auditory hallucinations and becomes agitated when there are too many competing sounds, you may want to:

- keep the television off,
- play music softly,
- limit the number of people in the environment, and/or
- suggest your relative use head phones to keep out outside sounds.

ASSESS YOUR UNIQUE SITUATION

You need to know the possible problem areas and your mentally ill relative's capacities before you proceed. Begin by assessing the following:

- Does she make sense when talking? Does she remember what was said?
- Is she able to plan ahead?
- Can he listen to reason, and work out compromises?
- Does he understand a future-oriented idea?
- Does a schedule help?
- Does she have the patience needed to participate in decision making?
- Is he oppositional?
- Does she have fixed delusional ideas or themes? Do they dominate her actions?
- Can she tolerate crowds? Can she tolerate more than one or two people at a time?
- Are there things you can do to make him feel more comfortable?
- Do you know what will help?

PRIORITIZE

Before you decide what you can do to make things more manageable, you must know what you are willing to do. You must be clear about what part of the celebration is really important and traditional to you and your family. Consider the whole picture, not just the person with a mental illness. You may decide it is:

- a large family dinner,
- house decoration,

- going to services,
- opening gifts, or caroling.

Discuss this with your family, spouse, partner, friends or whomever you plan celebrations with and list all aspects of the holiday season that are considered important. You might want to put your list in order (ranking from the most to the least important).

If you are going to try to make holidays more manageable and easier for the person with mental illness, you may have to make the holidays more ordinary. To make them more ordinary, you might have to give up something to get through the holidays without crisis.

If you have to give something up, at least know in advance what you value most. Compromise is not necessarily a “win or lose” proposition. It’s a decision-making process that involves weighing the pros and cons and making a decision based on them.