Not all Xmas trees are green[1]

Xmas season can bring joy and togetherness and be a joyful moment; but it can also be an emotionally complex situation, bringing feelings of exhaustion, overwhelm, and sadness. The pressures of maintaining holiday traditions, coupled with the emotional and physical toll of illness, can make this time of year especially challenging.

For this reason, it is important to take a proactive approach to facing the challenges that might emerge. **Coping strategies** can be helpful as they are actions or thoughts used to purposefully approach or modify one's reaction to stressful or unpleasant situations. In the next paragraphs, we describe potential mental health challenges that may emerge during this festive season, as well as coping strategies that may contribute address them.

Depression. Depressed mood or loss of pleasure or interest in activities for long periods of time. Depression is different from regular mood changes and feelings about everyday life. Depression can be described as a dark feeling that can be intense and overwhelming. It can cause you to feel hopeless and helpless and can carry on for weeks, months, or even longer. It can impact diet, sleep, relationships, and productivity. Useful **coping strategies** are:

- Set boundaries and prioritize events, limiting social commitments to be able to spend time alone when needed
- Seek connections and interactions with people that bring positivity
- If loneliness is a concern, volunteering can provide a sense of purpose, connection, and empathy
- Practice self-compassion by being gentle with yourself
- Accept that it's normal to feel sadness, even during times that are expected to be joyful

Anxiety. Ongoing excessive worry, fear, and apprehensive expectations, occurring more days than not for at least 6 months, about "what if" scenarios rather than a concrete cause.

Stress. The development of specific fear behaviors that last from three days to one month after a traumatic event or situation (e.g., financial worries). Stress is tied to a clear cause and diminishes when the situation is resolved. Useful **coping strategies** to address both anxiety and stress are:

- Plan ahead to avoid last minute changes of your schedule and plans
- Practice relaxation techniques that have proved to be helpful to calm you
- Take regular breaks during busy days
- Set clear boundaries and avoid unnecessary commitments
- Prioritize your wellbeing

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD). SAD is a type of depression that occurs at the same time each year, most commonly during the fall and winter months when daylight hours are shorter. Common signs include low energy, difficulty concentrating, changes in sleep and appetite, feelings of hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. Useful **coping strategies** are:

- Consider using light therapy to simulate sunlight and contribute to the balance of mood-regulation hormones
- Stay active to boost mood and energy levels; whenever possible, look for natural light exposure
- Stick to a healthy routine

[1] Adapted from: **Xmas is the most wonderful (& difficult) time of the year**, a Webinar held by Ken Porter, National Project Director, Mood Disorders Society of Canada and supported by Pfizer Canada on December 13th, 2024

Grief. Anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. Grief often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future. Key impacts include intensified emotions, painful reminders, sense of isolation, disrupted routines, physical and mental strain. Useful coping strategies are:

- Honor your loved ones by engaging in traditions that keep their memories
- Allow yourself to feel sadness during Xmas time
- Seek support and try talking with others who share or understand what you are going through

Family members can also contribute with those undergoing mood challenges by:

- Fostering open and honest communication
- Respect boundaries establish by the person
- Prioritizing meaningful interactions without overexerting the person we want to support
- Seek emotional support to talk openly about their feelings

What can we do to improve our Xmas tree?[2]

Sometimes, we may also undergo a more generalised sense of challenge. To help you navigate these complexities, we've created a virtual tree filled with coping strategies, tailored to provide emotional support and practical tools during the holidays. Each ornament on the tree represents a different coping strategy designed to help you find moments of peace, joy, and connection in the midst of this challenging time.

By choosing different ornaments from the tree, you can explore a range of activities and ideas that may help reduce stress, increase emotional resilience, and foster a sense of well-being. Whether you're looking for ways to bond as a family, find individual moments of calm, or simply seek comfort during the holidays, the virtual tree is here to offer support and ideas.

How to Use the Tree

- Choose Your Ornament: Select an ornament (strategy) from the tree that feels right for you or your family at this moment. You can choose multiple ornaments or revisit the tree throughout the season to try different strategies.
- Reflect & Share: After trying an activity, take a moment to reflect on how it made you feel. You can share your experiences with family members or write them down in a journal.
- Be Gentle with Yourself: The holidays can be tough, and it's important to remember that it's okay not to feel okay all the time. The tree is here to offer options, but it's up to you to decide what you need at any given moment.

Coping Strategies as Ornaments for the Tree

- Mindful moments: Take a few minutes each day for mindful breathing or guided meditation. This simple practice can help reduce stress and ground you in the present moment, helping to alleviate feelings of overwhelm.

[2] Activity prepared by the patient support group at CCC

- Gratitude journaling: Write down three things you're grateful for. Focusing on the positives, no matter how small, can shift your perspective and promote feelings of hope and appreciation.
- Create a holiday playlist: Music can be incredibly soothing and uplifting. Create a playlist of your favorite holiday songs or calming tunes to help create a serene and festive atmosphere.
- Family story time: Share stories from past holiday seasons. It can be comforting to revisit memories together and celebrate the sense of tradition, even if things are different this year.
- Self-care moment: Take a break to indulge in something that makes you feel good—a warm bath, a cup of tea, or a few quiet moments with a book. Recharging your own energy helps you be more present for others.
- Acts of kindness: Help others by doing something small, like sending a card or making a small donation to a charity of your choice. Helping others can bring a sense of fulfillment and increase feelings of connection and purpose
- Candle lighting: Light a candle or gather your family around a cozy light. Sometimes, the simple act of light can be a reminder that even in dark moments, hope shines through
- Creative expression: Engage in an arts and crafts activity, like decorating ornaments or creating a family holiday card. Expressing creativity can reduce stress and bring people closer together
- Walk in nature: Step outside for a walk, even if it's just for a few minutes. Fresh air and nature can refresh your mind and help you feel more connected to the world around you
- Emotional check-in: Take time to check in with your own emotions and those of your loved ones. Sometimes just acknowledging how you feel can bring a sense of relief and understanding