

SURVIVING & THRIVING IN THE WINTER MONTHS

Helping Your Family Manage Stress, Anxiety, and Depression throughout the Long Winter



Winter is tough. In the best of times, the holiday season and winter months are recognized as a stressful time. Teachers and school counselors are routinely given reminders to be mindful of the ways that mental health issues can show up in students during the weeks around the holidays and last throughout the winter months. As adults, we see headlines about beating the winter blues. Our Midwest winters are hard under the best of circumstances. This winter is going to be an especially tough one, but there are also so many opportunities to make this winter happy and memorable for you and your family.

**Winter is something for which we need to be
mentally physically prepared.**

The mental health challenges that come with navigating the holiday season and the cold, dreary, long winter should not be ignored- it takes thought and purposeful planning to navigate these difficult months. The effort that you put into planning will be worth it. Going into the winter months, we make sure that our kids have coats, boots, and mittens, but we can also work to prepare to help our children navigate the excitement, stress, expectation, and uncertainty of this season.



409 B AVE
KALONA, IA 52257
641.777.2774
IOWAFAMILYCOUNSELING.COM

**SUPPORTING CHILDREN
AND FAMILIES WITH
GENUINE, EMPATHETIC,
AND COLLABORATIVE
MENTAL HEALTHCARE
ACROSS RURAL IOWA**

FOLLOW US:
@IOWAFAMILYCOUNSELING

Mental Health in the Winter Months

Why is this time so difficult for people? This is a difficult question to answer because we are each impacted by our own unique experiences and circumstances, but many difficulties are rooted in the difference between our expectations for the season and the reality of our circumstances. We often remember the love and magic that we have felt during this season and we are faced with happy, holiday advertisements that reinforce these feelings. We expect that we should feel all warm and fuzzy throughout the whole season, but in reality, we have a lot of mixed feelings and challenges that come to the surface. This is the same for our children.

As people grow up, they will lose bits of the magic of the holiday season as they experience more hardships and understand the complexities of the world. We experience loss, financial hardships, changing family dynamics, and other personal challenges. This doesn't mean that we no longer experience the joy of the season but it feels different than we feel like it should.

It can feel like everyone is having fun and happy when we are not. This can amplify negative feelings and increase feelings of isolation. We can expect these feelings to be amplified in this time of COVID precautions and restrictions.

It is natural and normal to feel sad and anxious during the holidays and winter months and these feelings can grow and persist throughout this cold season. You are not alone in these feelings and it is okay to acknowledge them.



Signs that Our Children are Experiencing Anxiety, Stress, or Depression

It is very important that we keep tabs on our own mental health while also mindful of signs and symptoms that children can display when they are experiencing anxiety, stress, and depression.

Complaining of Feeling Sick or Not Feeling Well

This often is one of the first warning signs of imbalance stress or anxiety in children. It is also one that is easily overlooked. When kids complain of not feeling well, it often is that they truly aren't feeling well. They may have a virus or bacterial infection or they may be experiencing stress and anxiety. Just like adults, children can have headaches, stomachaches, or digestive disruptions when they are feeling anxious or stressed. They may feel the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety without understanding that it is related to stress and anxiety. Children often do not have the words to describe these complex feelings. If you have noticed that your child seems to be complaining more about not feeling well, you can look for patterns, talk to them about their feelings, and you can also talk to your pediatrician.

Negative Changes in Behavior and Mood

Negative changes in behavior can include many things. These behaviors can be demonstrated by a marked increase in irritability. It can include more bickering, fighting with parents, or conflicts with siblings. It may even show itself with an increase in negative self-talk. For example, you might notice that your child is saying things like I can't do anything right or I am so dumb.

Changes in Socialization

We should also be aware of how our children's social behaviors change at home and in other situations. Children who are experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression may become more withdrawn and antisocial. They may not be enjoying the same things that they have in the past, quitting activities, or just they may just seem more withdrawn.

On the other side of this spectrum, they may begin hanging out with friends in person and online more and engaging in more risky behaviors. This can range from blatantly breaking rules and expectations to engage in dangerous behaviors to sending inappropriate online messages or accessing online content that they know is off-limits.

Regressive Behaviors

Regressive behaviors that can become noticeable when children are dealing with stress, anxiety, or depression can include things such as bedwetting, baby-talking, throwing fits or tantrums, thumb-sucking, hair twirling, or any other behavior that does not seem appropriate for their age.

A Warning About Severe Symptoms

Severe symptoms related to stress, anxiety, and depression can increase greatly during the holiday season and the winter months and can even reach dangerous levels. If you notice severe symptoms in yourself or in others, do not hesitate- go immediately to the nearest emergency room or call 911. Emergency departments are equipped to help immediately and to help secure the mental health resources that you may need.



When to Seek Non-Emergency Psychiatric Help

- Marked change in personality, eating or sleeping patterns
- Inability to cope with problems or daily activities
- Avoidance of social activities
- Strange or extreme ideas
- Excessive anxiety
- Prolonged depression or loss of interest or enjoyment
- Thinking or talking about suicide
- Substance abuse
- Extreme mood swings or excessive anger, hostility or violent behavior

Is this an Emergency?

If you believe that you or someone else is in danger of harming themselves or others call 911 or immediately go to the Emergency Room

- Becoming violent
- Self-harming
- Threatening, discussing, or planning to end their life.
- Erratic and Violent behavior towards themselves or others

ADDITIONAL EMERGENCY RESOURCES

Domestic Violence Intervention Program
(800) 373-1043

Crisis Center of Johnson County
24-Hour Crisis Line
319-351-0140

Iowa Warm Line
(5-10 PM/7 days per week)
1-844-775-9276

Poison Control
1-800-222-1222

Nationwide Suicide Prevention Hotline
1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Chat Crisis Services
IMAlive.org or CrisisChat.org

Text Crisis Services
Text 'START' to 74174



Activities for Supporting Positive Mental Health

It's okay to not know what to do to help our kids. We can only do our best. We can acknowledge that winter is difficult and work together to plan for activities that will help you and your family throughout the season. We can work to keep ourselves and our kids mentally healthy throughout the winter by engaging in activities:

- Engage in Activities as a Family
- Serve Others
- Move Your Body
- Talk With and Listen to Our Kids

Engage in Activities as a Family

When we do things together, we have fun. It can be hard to know what to do when we have family time- it's like scrolling through Netflix and never deciding what to watch. I suggest planning ahead and putting the family time on the calendar. This is good because it holds you accountable as parents, but also gives the kids something to look forward to and the follow-through builds trust and connections within your family. Here are my family's favorite activities:

- **Board/Card Game Night** - Any game will do
- **Video Game Night**- There are a lot of options that everyone in the family can enjoy
- **Movie Night** - Pop some popcorn and enjoy the show
- **Treat and a Drive** - Run through a drive-thru or pack a treat and just drive around
- **Parent/Kid "Dates"** - Ask for help, so you can make one-on-one time for each child, even if it is just an hour
- **Baking or Cooking Together** - Ask your kids to pick a recipe
- **Crafting**- Many stores carry craft kits that are all ready to go

Serve Others

Helping others is a great way to bring joy to you and your kids. When we help others, it makes us feel good and connected within our community. Check-in with family or friends by delivering a meal, baked goodies, flowers, a card, or a craft. "Just because" gifts or visits are so meaningful. They do not have to be big, grand gestures or take a lot of time but they build strong connections that benefit you, your family, and the recipient. We have all felt extra isolated over the past year, so these next few months may be extra tough for many. Building and maintaining connections with loved ones and the community during these long winter months will be important for everyone's mental health and well-being.

Move Your Body

Even a little bit of movement can give your mood and mindset a positive boost. Whether you choose to move inside or outside, the movement has shown great benefits to your mental health- even if you just move for 5-10 minutes! Doing activities with friends or family is also a great idea because they help to hold you accountable to move your body, but it also creates and maintains positive connections that can easily dwindle after the holidays.

When it is cold outside and warm and snuggly inside, it can be hard to get out but fresh air and sunshine help to maintain a positive mindset. This is where planning comes in. Put it on your schedule- if the weather doesn't cooperate, then bump it to the next day. Winter doesn't mean that we can't get outside, bundle up, get out, then reward yourself with a hot beverage when you get back!

Talk With Kids and Listen to Them

Kids thrive when they feel heard and understood. You can ask them questions to get the conversation started or let the conversation start naturally while you are engaging in an activity or game. Making eye-contact, avoid looking at your phone or other distractions, and asking follow-up questions will help to keep the conversation rolling.

Small conversations build big relationships.

Preparing your mental-health plan for winter is just as essential as any other preparations that you do to get ready for this harsh season. We know that harsh physical and mental conditions are coming. This preparation is really about purposefully and conscientiously building and maintaining positive connections and habits throughout the winter months. It is so hard to get over the hurdles of the cold, the weather, and this year's threat of illness, but there is so much we can do to get through it and make this a meaningful and connected season.



References

- American Psychological Association. (2019, September 5). Identifying signs of stress in your children and teens. <http://www.apa.org/topics/stress-children>
- Dowshen, S. (2015, February). Childhood Stress (for Parents) - KidsHealth. Retrieved November 16, 2020, from Kidshealth.org website: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/stress.html>
- Pietro, S. (2016, February 2). How to Take the Stress Out of the Holidays. Retrieved July 28, 2019, from Child Mind Institute website: <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-take-the-stress-out-of-the-holidays/>
- Walsh, E., & Walsh, D. (2019, October 9). Stress in Children. Retrieved from Psychology Today website: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smart-parenting-smarter-kids/201910/stress-in-children>