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Coping with Holiday Stress: Tips for Navigating the Festive Season

Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, is reminding the community to look after their mental health this holiday season. While many people look forward to this time of year, it can also be a time of heightened anxiety, stress and loneliness for others.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, recognises that the festive season can sometimes amplify existing struggles.

“For some, this time of year can bring up difficult memories, like the loss of loved ones or past traumatic events such as bushfires or ongoing recovery from floods. For others, the season can amplify feelings of loneliness and the financial expectations of gift giving can also increase stress,” Ms. Reay said.

“It’s important to remind people that there are things they can do in their everyday life to make sure they are looking after their mental health over this period,” she said.

“We asked Daniel Angus, our Clinical Advisor Primary Care - Mental Health, who is a psychologist and is also a Deputy Commissioner of the NSW Mental Health Commission, to identify some of the key stressors during the season and provide some strategies that may help people cope,” said Ms Reay.

According to Daniel, financial stress, family issues, loss and grief, loneliness and isolation, and anniversaries of natural disasters are some of the key issues that can cause stress and anxiety this time of year.

“Daniel has recommended the following tips to help maintain wellbeing throughout this festive holiday” said Ms Reay.

Financial Distress

1. **Create a realistic budget for the holidays, focusing on essential expenses** - Allocate funds for gifts, meals and decorations based on what you can afford without overextending yourself. Consider lower-cost or handmade gift options.
2. **Seek Financial Counselling** - Seek help before you reach crisis. Services such as [Salvation Army](#), [Wesley Mission](#) and [Muru Mitigar](#) provide free, confidential financial counselling to help develop budget and manage debts.
3. **Plan Meals Wisely** - Holiday meals can be festive without being extravagant. You can often find low-cost ideas online. There are also local community services who provide food at low or no cost. Anglicare have Community Pantries across the region and you can find your nearest one on their website through their [Community Pantry locator](#). Hawkesbury Council also have a list of local food and emergency relief services [on their website](#).

Managing Family Dynamics

1. **Prioritise your wellbeing over your sense of obligation** - It's okay to prioritise your emotional wellbeing over traditional obligations and pressure to participate in family and/or social gatherings over the holiday period.



2. **Set personal boundaries and manage your expectations** - If you are going to participate in family and/or social gatherings, it's okay to limit the time you spend in environments that make you feel tense or stressed and to avoid certain topics that can trigger conflict.
3. **Self-Care** - Taking time to relax, practicing mindfulness, or seeking out positive social interactions can help mitigate stress. Maintaining a balanced diet, adequate hydration (especially given high temperatures), and regular exercise can also help support emotional resilience.

Grief and Loss

1. **Accept that grief is a natural response to loss and that it's okay to feel a mix of emotions** - Feeling sadness, guilt or even anger is normal. Expressing these feelings through journaling, talking to a trusted friend or participating in a support group can provide relief. Reach out to services such as [Griefline](#), which provides free, accessible support and resources to individuals navigating grief and loss.
2. **Establish new traditions that feel manageable and meaningful** - Doing something like lighting a candle, preparing a favourite dish of the lost loved one, or dedicating a quiet moment of reflection during the festivities help. Alternatively, honouring existing traditions in a way that acknowledges the loss can help integrate the loved one's memory into the holiday.
3. **Surround yourself with supportive people who can provide comfort and understanding** - Share stories and memories with those who knew your loved one, or simply spend time with friends who help you feel less alone.

Loneliness and Isolation

1. **Connect with others** - even small interactions, like chatting with a cashier, local barista or a fellow passenger on the train can improve your sense of belonging. The [My Health Connector](#) website is a free online directory to help people improve their social connections and lifestyle supports. The directory provides information about local social and support groups people can join.
2. **Volunteer** - Helping others can provide a sense of purpose and connect you with like-minded people.
3. **Limit social media** - While it might feel like connecting, excessive social media can heighten feelings of loneliness and isolation. Try to engage with people in person or via phone/video calls.

Bushfires/disaster anniversaries

1. **Take practical precautions** – Being prepared for disasters and emergencies and having a Disaster Plan can help to minimise stress. Things like clearing debris, ensuring gutters are clean, having an evacuation plan and other things recommended by the [Rural Fire Service](#) or [State Emergency Services](#) can help.
2. **Use mindfulness and grounding techniques to manage anxiety** - During periods of heightened fire or flood risk, these techniques can help focus your mind on the present and reduce feelings of overwhelm. Engage in structured breathing exercises or calming activities to counteract distress triggered by weather conditions or disaster-related memories.
3. **Seek help early if you are not coping** - If you need additional support, there are a number of free or low cost local mental health services available. The [Mental Health Help website](#) provides a directory of services in the local region that can provide support.

If you do find yourself in need of more formal mental health support, and you are not sure where to start, Ms Reay suggests talking to your GP in the first instance.



“Your GP can connect you with local services and help you understand what kind of support might be best for you,” she said.

“Alternatively, Head to Health (Medicare Mental Health) services are free to access and can also be a good place to start if you are not sure what support you need,” said Ms Reay.

In the Hawkesbury area, the **Hawkesbury Head to Health (Medicare Mental Health) service** is available for walk-in support without the need of a prior appointment. It is located at 1 Musson Lane, Richmond and is open Monday-Wednesday and Friday 1:00pm to 5:00pm, Thursday and Saturday 1:00pm to 7:00pm, and public holidays (including Christmas, Boxing and New Years Day) 1:00pm to 7:00pm.

Another option is to call the **Head to Health phonenumber on 1800 595 212**, which helps you to find free or low-cost local mental health support in the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas. The service is available Monday to Friday from 8:30am - 5:00pm, excluding public holidays.

“When you call the phonenumber, you will be asked to enter your postcode so you can be transferred to a local mental health professional. These clinicians know our local region and will take the time to listen to your concerns and connect you with the most appropriate free local service in your area,” Ms Reay said.

The holidays can also be a difficult time for young people. **headspace Hawkesbury** provides free early intervention support to young people aged 12-25 years across mental health, physical health, work and study, and alcohol and other drug needs. They also host free holiday activities to foster connection. More information, including how to access this service and holiday operation times, is available via www.nbmphn.com.au/headspace

Ms. Reay reminds us that if you're struggling with feelings of sadness, anxiety, stress, or just not feeling like yourself, it's okay to ask for help.

“One of the most important things you can do for your mental health is to reach out, taking that first step is often difficult but no one needs to feel alone and most people will need support throughout their life,” she said.

If you or if someone you know is in crisis, call Lifeline 24/7 on **13 11 14**.

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