



Surgeon's Corner December 2023



As a psychologist and a fellow veteran, I understand the unique challenges that the Christmas season can bring for veterans and their families. This month's surgeon's letter aims to provide practical strategies for veterans and their families to enhance their mental wellbeing during this time.

- 1. Connect with your Community:** The holiday season is an ideal time to reconnect with your community. This could mean participating in local veterans' groups, volunteering, or joining holiday events. These connections can provide a sense of belonging and purpose. If you find strength in your religion, it is a great time to seek out fellowship in local churches.
- 2. Create New Traditions:** Sometimes, the holidays can bring up memories that are challenging for you. Creating new traditions can be a therapeutic way to redefine the season. This could be as simple as a new holiday recipe, a walk in a favorite park, or a craft project.
- 3. Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques:** Practicing mindfulness can be particularly effective. Techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga can help in managing stress and anxiety that often come with the holidays.
- 4. Physical Activity:** Regular physical activity is a proven mood booster. Whether it's a structured exercise program, a team sport, or just regular walks, staying active can significantly impact your mental health. One excellent way to start or maintain a good level of physical activity is to do it with a friend. You and your friend will hold each other accountable, and you will end up being more physically active than if you tried on your own. Furthermore, you will benefit from spending quality time with your friend.
- 5. Please consider limiting alcohol use:** While it's tempting to indulge during the holidays, excessive alcohol and unhealthy eating can exacerbate mental health issues. Moderation is key, and focusing on a balanced diet can help maintain both physical and mental health.
- 6. Set Realistic Expectations:** The holidays don't have to be perfect. Setting realistic expectations for gatherings, gift-giving, and celebrations can alleviate unnecessary stress. Don't let perfection be the enemy of good enough.
- 7. Reach Out for Support:** Remember, it's okay to seek help. If you find the holiday season particularly challenging, don't hesitate to reach out to mental health professionals at the VA or other support networks such as VFW, American Legion, and local churches.
- 8. Reflect on and Acknowledge Your Achievements:** Take time to reflect on your achievements over the past year, no matter how small they may seem. Acknowledging your strengths and resilience can be a powerful tool in maintaining a positive outlook.

Remember, everyone's journey is unique, and what works for another person might not work for you. It's important to find what best suits your needs and circumstances. Your local veteran organizations and the VA is here to support you through the Christmas season and beyond.

If you are in distress, please call or text 988

Dr. Opedal