

HANDLING THE HOLIDAYS

Holidays tend to be especially stressful for people with a mental illness because:

1. There are often implied, if not explicit, expectations of certain types of behaviour (e.g. exchanging of gifts), feelings (happiness), and so on that they may not be able to live up to.
2. Large groups can be over stimulating and confusing.
3. Holidays can be painful reminders of times past when things were better, thus highlighting present disabilities.
4. Family get-togethers can raise the issue of what the ill person is to tell people about his or her life, illness, and so forth.
5. Holidays lend themselves to ill people comparing themselves unfavourably to other (perhaps younger), higher-functioning or more accomplished relatives.

You can help your relative reduce the stress by:

1. Discussing plans in advance
2. Acknowledge any mixed feelings he or she may have. Do not make assumptions about how he or she will feel or act
3. Keeping expectations realistic, especially regarding whether your relative can tolerate a gathering, for how long, and what kind of participation he or she is capable of
4. Respecting and supporting your relative's choices and decisions regarding whether he or she is comfortable participating and in what way
5. Accepting your and your relative's limits
6. Helping your relative figure out how to handle some of the stress (e.g. how the person might answer questions, what task he or she might like to focus on, how long to stay, places to go to take breaks), if he or she is willing and able to discuss the event and his or her feelings. It may be important to acknowledge all family members' needs, preferences, and limits before a workable solution can be reached.