

## Managing Holiday Stress



Holidays are a great time of year to enjoy family, friends, traditions and good food. They can also bring about stress and overwhelming feelings of depression. Statistically, the holiday and winter seasons show an increase in falls for both physically compromised individuals as well as healthy individuals.

It is important to recognize the potential effects that holiday stress can have on our residents, patients and loved ones. Holiday depression is most often associated with two main triggers: feelings of overwhelming loneliness and loss of independence. Remember that while you are working, cooking, cleaning, shopping, decorating, the residents, patients and loved ones we care for used to do all of those things at one time or another too. And while we sometimes wish away this stress when we are capable and able to complete these tasks, when the time comes that we are no longer able to participate in such activities it can feel very isolating and discouraging.

Signs and symptoms of holiday depression can be easily hidden as residents, patients and loved ones can appear to be participating in the choir singing or enjoying the eggnog and cookies. What is important to remember is that the physiological symptoms of depression can increase the risk of falls significantly. Therefore, training your staff on how to engage residents, patients and loved ones during this busy time should be a key consideration in your overall fall management program.

Things to consider while educating to your staff on what to look for should include:

- **Tearfulness:** Becoming tearful in and of itself will expend a lot of general energy and can make a person feel “tired”. Also, the presence of tears will impact a person’s visual acuity and depth perception thereby challenging that person’s safety while mobilizing or ambulating. Additionally, increased attempts to reach for tissues and towels may be associated with an increase in fall risk.
- **Motivation:** When a person is feeling isolated, lonely, with a sense of loss or sadness; these feelings may generate an overall sense of exhaustion or lethargy. A decrease in endurance for any reason will increase the likelihood of a fall.
- **Increased Anger:** Some residents, patients or loved ones will work through depression by becoming more angry and trying to place blame for their anger on others. When this happens staff may begin to feel less engaged with the person and this can create difficulty in managing overall care. Also, the person may want to exhibit greater independence to hide feelings of depression and by doing so the person might take some risks with mobility that could lead to falls.
- **Alcohol:** Holidays may involve “toasts” to celebrate the occasion and the season. Residents or patients who partake in alcoholic beverages may experience untoward interactions between alcohol and their medications. Additionally, alcoholic intake may impair a person’s sense of judgment, balance or safety awareness increasing their risk for a fall.

Take the time during a meeting or care conference to have an open dialogue with staff about what to look for when it comes to signs and symptoms of depression during this hectic and exciting time of year. Once the potential risks are identified, an individualized care plan for the resident, patient or loved one can be developed that focuses on the person’s need in a compassionate and helpful manner.

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