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Local Therapist Offers Suggestions to Help Fight Depression During the Holidays

By *Sophie Braccini*



Margie Ryerson Photo Sophie Braccini

The phrase, "Be kind; everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle," by Rev. John Watson, also known as Ian Maclaren, was first quoted in the 1897 Christmas edition of *The British Weekly*. The quote is still relevant today, and especially during the holidays.

December has a high incident rate for suicide, as sadly illustrated in Moraga at the beginning of the month when police were unable to stop a man from taking his own life. "During the holidays, it is the contrast between the messages of joy and happiness and gratitude, and inner feelings of down, that contribute to make people feeling more alone and isolated from the joyfulness everybody else seems to be experiencing," says Margie Ryerson, a licensed marriage and family therapist from Orinda who wrote her master's thesis on suicide.

According to Ryerson, men are more prone than women to take action. "When men have suicidal thoughts, they complete it more often than women," she says. For many years, the suicide rate has been about four times higher among men than among women, according to The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. In 2013, white males accounted for 70 percent of all suicides and the highest suicide rate was among people 45 to 64 years old. It is the 10th leading cause of death for Americans.

"Women want support and compassion, and they confide in their friends," explains Ryerson. "Men typically don't have the same support system, they don't share and might not be in touch with their feelings. (Most of the time) they confide in their partner, and if something happens to that relationship, that is a contributing factor." She says that men are often more invested in their careers and their financial responsibilities to their families and if something goes wrong, it can be a trigger. "There is a lot of untreated anxiety and depression among men."

Reflecting on the recent incident, Ryerson says that our communities tend to have high expectations, and if people don't feel that they fit in, they will think that others might look down on them and will not feel accepted, whether or not it is true. "A lot of it is projection. If we think for example that we are not good enough parents, we will feel that everybody around us believes that we are not good parents," she says. "How we judge ourselves is really significant." This leads to high stress, anxiety and depression.

And people are able to mask depressed feelings very well. "Some people feel guilty because they did not see the warning signs, but certain individuals do not exhibit any warning signs and can't be stopped," explains Ryerson. The warning signs, if present, include drinking more heavily, having a low energy for life, secluding yourself and not wanting to interact, sudden anger, irregular

sleep or eating patterns, unusual risky behaviors and, of course, sadness. Ryerson notes that for adolescents, acts can be impulsive and difficult to foresee.

If there are warning signs, Ryerson says it is important to tune in and to also get help. "The best we can do is to pay close attention to our loved ones, to be an active part of their world. We need to express what difference they make in our lives, to show them how important they are," recommends Ryerson. "Ask questions, show affection, show caring, and find support for them if we see them floundering. We should not feel alone and we should reach out to professionals and urge our loved ones to get help." She suggests talking to a general practitioner as a good starting point, both for adults and teens. "Sometimes I've had a family member call their depressed relative's physician and ask them to check for depression when they come for their physical."

Police officers are often called into situations of acute crisis and many are trained in crisis intervention. "We train in recognizing mental illness as well as techniques and strategies to intervene if someone puts themselves or anyone else at risk," says Moraga Police Acting Corporal Will Davis. He adds that in a crisis situation, there is often a partnership that is set in place between law enforcement and emergency responders. He wants to remind people that the Contra Costa Crisis Center can be reached at (800) 833-2900, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is available to people with suicidal thoughts and those living around them. The phone number 211 is the information and referral line that can also be called 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

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