

SIEC Alert #16, December 1995

Are Suicide Rates Higher at Christmas?

Research defies the popular misconception that suicide rates are higher during the Christmas period. From a sample of more than 188,000 recorded suicides in the U.S., Phillips and Wills (1987) found that on average, there were 102 fewer suicides on holidays compared to other days of the year. They also noted a dip in suicide rates before and after the Christmas holiday. Sparhawk (1987) found Christmas to be the one national holiday that had a suppressing effect on the suicide rate in his sample of 13,651 suicides. Studies on monthly and seasonal variation in attempted suicide also show decreases in December. Looking at suicide rates in Alberta from 1989 to 1993, Dyck (1994) reports the highest frequency of suicides occurred during the month of August, and the least in September. December was found to be the ninth highest of all the months. These and other studies conclude that Christmas may indeed serve a protective function.

Some Reasons Why

Those who have studied temporal trends in suicidal behaviour have speculated on reasons for the decline in suicide rates at Christmas. Here are some ideas:

- The gathering of friends and relatives, surround and protect vulnerable people.
- Christmas celebrations may evoke positive memories, hopefulness, and a renewed outlook for those in distress.
- Community resources: There is an increased awareness of *safety-nets* available during this period (food banks, shelter and outreach programs)

Coping with the Holidays

Suicide rates may be down during this period, but crisis workers all agree that Christmas can be a very stressful time. Loneliness, depression, feelings of loss, financial burdens, family conflicts, and alcohol abuse can intensify during the holidays.

Here are the expert's tips for coping!

- Plan ahead. Take time to identify your feelings about Christmas.
- Be realistic, look at what you can afford to give.
- Choose to celebrate with the people who make you feel positive and hopeful.
- Let go of your expectations & make time for what is important to you!

Suicide & Christmas: Selected SIEC Resources

SIEC #950153
Dyck, R. (1994). Christmas: Arisk or protective factor for suicide? *AADAC Developments*, 8(14), 1-2.

SIEC #871076
Phillips, D. P., & Wills, J. S. (1987). A drop in suicides around major national holidays. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 17(1), 1-11.

SIEC #880380
Sparhawk, T. G. (1987). Traditional holidays & suicide. *Psychological Reports* 60, 245-246.

SIEC #911302
Masterton, G. (1991). Monthly and seasonal variation in parasuicide. A sex difference. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 158, 155-157.

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SIEC #930363
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SIEC Resources Continued*

SIEC #870559

Christensen, R. (1984, Fall). The misdiagnosis of holiday and winter complaints: An unconscious shift in criteria? *Psychotherapy*, 21(3), 401.

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