

HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR MENTAL HEALTH THIS AUTUMN/WINTER

Words by Dr Kate Middleton



Cold weather significantly affects mental health - particularly if people are exposed to long spells where they are in cold rooms or spaces, or if a cold snap is unexpected. Being exposed to cold, especially if this is prolonged, triggers a kind of 'hibernation' mode for humans. Activity levels drop and the urge to huddle and keep warm makes people feel drowsy and sluggish. This lethargy can trigger low mood, or worsen pre-existing issues with anxiety or depression. It can also negatively impact sleep if activity levels during the day are very low - leading to a vicious cycle of insomnia which can make mental health worse. And all of these symptoms are worsened if exposure to daylight is decreased - so if people find it difficult to leave the house, the impact is even greater.

But the impact of cold isn't just about a risk of illness

Coldness has been shown to impact the normal functioning of the mind. If you are cold, your memory is often affected, along with drops in attention, creativity and problem solving. Being cold even effects our relationships. Studies show that in cold conditions people are much more likely to isolate and find conversation or social situations difficult or overwhelming. Even our trust of other people drops - it's a complex combination of factors that makes people even more likely to become isolated or stop connecting with people around them, as well as raising stress levels and making them feel unproductive and useless.

Of course, the biggest concern for mental health is the combined impact of all these things. And this autumn/winter they sit alongside the loss of many of the little pleasures that might normal cheer people up - a favourite food, a special outing - even things like going out for coffee which may now be impossible extravagances with money so tight. Despair and hopelessness are the most difficult emotions to deal with, and for some will raise of other issues like addictions, self harm and suicidal thoughts as they struggle to manage these intense and powerful feelings.



It's been brilliant to read so much about churches and networks thinking creatively about how to support people in need of warm spaces or practical support this autumn/winter. It's worth us all pausing to consider who is most at risk in our own community spaces. It may be the elderly, those with long term health problems, or young mums or dads facing long days at home with babies and small children. In some areas it may be students, or those who have to work from home who face the biggest struggle to keep warm. But whoever it is, including whether it is for yourself and your family, how should we be watching out for people's emotional and mental wellbeing in such a difficult season?

Here are three important things to consider

1 - Think practical

Getting warm isn't just about physical wellbeing. People need good advice and support to ensure they don't face relentless cold. Heating just one room is a good tip, together with other measures to stay warm such as blankets, layers etc. But it is important to be aware that many of these discourage moving around. Part of a practical plan needs to be periods of activity in the day and week. Think about how you can help people with this. A short community walk, or outdoor treasure hunt? Or indoor activities - free or low cost exercise or dance classes, community choir singalongs, or group games like indoor bowling or mini golf. Mental stimulation is also important - but with finances so pressed it isn't easy. Are there things you can organise? A quiz? Puzzle swap? Lego building? Board game cafe? Second hand book library? Screening of movies or box sets (where copyright rules allow!). And remember people's wider wellbeing - think about what and how people are eating. Particularly as so many worrying about the cost of heating food could you combine an event with the offer of a hot meal?

2 - Think people

The next most important thing is how people connect with others, and stay in touch with friends and family. It is all too easy in weeks of people huddling in their homes for some to fall through the net and vanish off everyone's radar. Think about how you can create webs of connection in your community. Who is in contact with those people? Be creative - the more different options you can offer, the more chance someone will hear about something that feels possible to them. Use community spaces, people's own homes, and online connection through zoom, WhatsApp or social media.

3 - Think prevention

So often our focus with mental health is all about illness and what to do when someone is unwell. Don't wait for crisis - particularly if you spot early signs of struggle, act. But even more, where there are steps you can take to support people and perhaps prevent problems, or help lift their mood and emotions, do it as much as you can! Think about where you can create fun and laughter - companionship and shared social space. Don't be afraid to ask how people are doing. Particularly if there are concerns around despair, depression or even more serious worries about suicidal thoughts or feelings, people often think that they shouldn't bring the subject up in case it makes things worse.

But the evidence is resoundingly in the other direction - creating safe spaces where people can share honestly and open up about difficult moods, emotions or concerns helps diffuse the power of those feelings and prevent more serious problems developing. And where you do discover people are finding things hard, help them to connect with people and services that can support them - professional support through their GP, or local mental health services, financial support through organisations like CAP UK or Citizen's advice and practical support through food banks and other community organisations.

In tough times, particularly in the darker months, it's easy for people to feel a kind of closing down into their own spaces and people. Perhaps this season we can all intentionally think more outward and keep a watch on those who may be struggling. But let's not forget for all of us that in difficult and dark times there is a source of hope and light which can see us through.

Psalm 18, in the Passion Translation, puts it like this: 'God You are the revelation-light in my darkness, and in your brightness I can see the path ahead.'

So let's not forget a final important 'P' - prayer. Why not pause right now and take a moment to speak that truth over your own life, those you love, and those you are concerned for, that God would keep hope and light alive, and guide us along a path to brighter days.

