



The Holidays Can Be Tough. Please Reach Out If You Are Struggling

Description

December is a month of great joy for many and a month of despair for some. I have experienced both. I know many others have, too.

I have been doing my best to bring awareness to the subject of emotional well-being. As this two-year journey of the pandemic has evolved, the conversations on mental health have increased ten-fold. The message in the workplace around “separating home and work” is gone. It never made much sense, anyway.

It is gratifying to see organizations using some of the Gratitude Group’s tools to help people in these difficult times. For example, the emotional pain scale that rates individuals and organizations on a 1-10 spectrum from *sense of well-being* to *trauma* works well. The individual assessment tool from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation creates needed self-conversations. Both of these are found in *The Well-Being Handbook* (ebook), which, along with *The Well-Being Tool Kit*, is available free upon request on the Gratitude Group [website](#).

Recently my colleague Dan Collard shared these tools with a healthcare system. A few days later, he received a note from the chief operations officer saying that since the presentation, people are sharing things in the mental health area they have not shared previously. The tools, as well as the tool kit and ebook, are creating that culture of trust and psychological safety needed to break the stigma around mental health issues.

This past week, I was fortunate to be on a group call with chief patient experience officers. One of the attendees held up *The Well-Being Handbook*. It’s good to see people using these resources.

Those in healthcare are familiar with the term “near miss.” For non-healthcare people who are reading this, it means something that was not desired that could have happened but did not. For years people in healthcare were reluctant to report near misses. Today the cultures are healthier in that near misses are reported and acted on. This is the culture of trust I often write about.

For the majority of companies that offer health benefits, a top expense in the benefit plan is a prescription antidepressant. We are fortunate these medicines are available. They can save lives. Yet I

do feel we all want to make sure the workforce has additional resources. This is why the tool kit and ebook are available.

Over the past several months in presenting on the topic, I have been very open about my own struggles and solutions for my own emotional well-being. I discuss suicide. There are some who feel that taking one's own life is selfish. From someone who has been there, the thought is the opposite: *I am a burden and am removing myself and the pain I am causing for you.*

Here is my story: December 24, 1982, was not a good day for me. I had gone through my second divorce on December 20, I owed lots of money, and I was very lonely and living in complete self-pity. I spent Christmas Eve alone (which was my own fault), drinking beer and playing records. As I woke up Christmas Day, I came down the stairs from my bedroom to see a Christmas tree and a few unopened gifts. I had nowhere to go.

At that moment, I had what is called a moment of clarity. By some miracle, I could suddenly see myself objectively. The picture was not pretty. At 31, I had messed up my life, had lost family members and friends, and did not see a way out. I had two thoughts: one was to take my own life, and the other was to reach out for help. Thankfully, I chose the second option.

I did not even know who to reach out to for help. I picked someone safe, a minister I had heard good things about but did not know. For some reason, this made sense. Reverend Huff met with me. I also came to the conclusion that a drink would not help, and it was then that I entered the rooms of recovery. I remember sitting against the wall not wanting to be noticed, thinking, *what a terrible thing*. I heard things that made no sense to me at first, like "one day at a time" and "surrender to win."

Yet for some reason, this defiant person became teachable. It was a miracle. I had reached out for help, surrendered to the fact that my life was a mess and drinking was not helping, and became teachable. I also began receiving help from a professional mental health therapist, Amy Storm, from Catholic Social Services.

On December 25, 2021, I will have 39 years of sobriety. This does not mean it has been a smooth, error-free 39 years. What it does mean is that even in dark times, I know a drink will not help. It means at times I will still need and benefit from professional help. I do know I never need to be alone.

Mark Goulston, MD, is someone I admire. He does great work with people in stress and trauma and in the area of suicide prevention and intervention. He taught me an activity I want to share:

Think of a time in the past several months when you experienced something you did not know if you would get through. Write down all the emotions you were feeling. They could include fear, anger, frustration, loneliness, despair, emotional fatigue, etc. Then ask yourself how you got through it. I guarantee it was *not* due to continued self-destructive behavior. It was most likely because you reached out to someone and got the help you needed.

This exercise can help you realize you have faced very difficult times and gotten through them even when at times you may not have thought so. It shows the value of sharing with others what you are going through and, many times, seeking professional support. It provides the light at the end of the tunnel you may need to keep going.

Looking back at that time in December of 1982, I felt I would never feel any joy again. I felt my life was over. I was so sad, so lonely, and so much in pain. The end-of-life thoughts come from the desire to relieve the pain. Yet I reached out for help, and, yes, I made it through. So can you. If the holidays are not a time of joy for you, know that you don't have to suffer alone. I encourage you to reach out if you are experiencing some of the feelings I describe.

For employers, I encourage you to create a culture where people do reach out to you and access the resources you provide. I am very assertive in this area for many reasons. If you've ever worked for me, you know I am in recovery. I am very open about my alcoholism, and here is a story that explains why:

Some years ago, a person who worked for my company at the time shared that her mother had died. She requested no contact from us for a while as she dealt with her mother's death. After a few days, my gut said to give her a call. While she did not report directly to me, we saw each other very often. I dialed her number. I figured if she did not want to talk, she would just not answer the phone. She answered and thanked me for calling.

As the call went on, she shared that for years, her mother battled alcoholism and this was a major cause of her death. I was glad she was comfortable sharing this with me. Yet one thought has always haunted me. I saw her all the time, she knew my own story of alcoholism, and we had 12-step meetings in one of our office spaces. What more could I have done so she would have been comfortable sharing what was taking place in her life? I know if it had been a physical condition like cancer or heart disease, she would have come to me to see how her mother could receive help. Alcoholism and other mental health issues should be no different.

I am so grateful I was given another chance. My hope is that you, too, will reach out for help if you need it and do all that you can to help others who are struggling to do the same.

Many of you have shared this journey of life with me. Thank you.

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