

Coping with Trauma during the Holidays

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ROCKFORD - The holidays are typically a time for joy and celebration with loved ones. But for some survivors of violent crime, the holidays can also be filled with stress, anxiety, and memories of not-so-happy times.

“For other folks, it can be the holidays that triggers something because maybe you’ve lost a loved one to gun violence or you witnessed losing that person and you’re going into the holidays and yes, it happened 20 years ago; that doesn’t mean you’re not going to have the symptoms and side effects of that loss,” says Therasa Yehling, manager for the OSF Strive Trauma Recovery Center at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center in Rockford.

Yehling says those side effects include anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a trauma such as gun violence, assaults, domestic violence, human trafficking and armed violence or robbery in which they are the victim or witness.

The events causing the trauma could have occurred two weeks ago or 10 years ago. There is no expiration date on the grief that happens as a result of violent crime, Yehling adds.

“When we talk to people we actually try to get a full picture of the trauma in their lifetime,” says Yehling. “We’re finding that some people have had a lot of trauma starting in their childhood all the way up. Really then, a new traumatic event can stir up all the old stuff that maybe we’ve never dealt with and the symptoms of trauma have rendered that person almost catatonic and they can’t function.”

Yehling offers several basic tips for violent crime survivors during the holidays.

- Trust your grief and your healing
- Experience the grief and don’t run from it
- Say no to things that make you uncomfortable and form healthy boundaries
- Create new traditions
- Make a list of things you’re grateful for this year
- Do something kind for someone else

If none of those things seem to help or if these feelings are interrupting daily activities Yehling says it’s time to seek professional help as soon as possible. She does warn that seeking support will also mean doing a deep dive into what’s causing your feelings.

“I think people have to understand that if someone is going to talk about something very traumatic, such as sexual assault, domestic violence, human trafficking – it is important that they talk to someone who can help them through that process, therapeutically,” says Yehling. “Otherwise you’re helping them to relive it and that’s about it.”

Yehling adds that our expectations of having the perfect time with family during the holiday season are often unrealistic. While that can be stressful enough, it becomes worse when you add the complexities of being a survivor of violent crime. Yehling encourages family and friends to go slowly and give their loved one the time and space they need to get through the holidays.

“I just think whether you have trauma or not everyone needs to be gentle and kind and supportive,” Yehling says.

For more information on help for survivors of violent crimes, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).

