

Coping with the new year blues this Christmas

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(Medical Xpress) -- Chair of Mental Health at the University of South Australia, Professor Nicholas Procter, says Christmas is a special opportunity for family and friends to re-connect with people - some of who have mental health problems and mental illness, as a means of building resilience to self harm in the New Year.

Professor Procter says there is a common misconception [suicide rates](#) increase at Christmas but research indicates it's in fact early in the [New Year](#) where people are more susceptible to [self harm](#) and likely to end their life by suicide.

“The evidence suggests that at Christmas relatives and friends are more likely to visit and reach out so often the family becomes a bigger part of

one's life at this time," he says. "Social and family connectedness is a known protective factor for suicide."

"Positive efforts of church and charity groups to provide support, special dinners, free presents for children and other social events such as Christmas carols in public places are an effective buffer in helping to alleviate deep social isolation that may be experienced around Christmas.

Professor Procter says self harm and suicide is more likely to take place in the New Year but more study is required as to why this is the case.

"International evidence indicates there are fewer suicide attempts than expected before Christmas and nearly 40 per cent more than expected after, especially on New Year's Day," he says.

"We can really only draw some inferences on this and the possibilities include some kind of postponement mechanism arising after the Christmas and New Year period, where motivation and opportunity is high at a time of decreased social connectedness.

"Further research is needed to understand the complex interplay between psychosocial and individual factors, as well as known risk factors for suicide.

Although fewer people may self harm at Christmas, Professor Procter says despite the protective barrier provided at Christmas time there will still be many who will exhibit self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

"There is always the group of people, albeit smaller in number who, for a range of complex reasons, have such a strong intent to die that the [Christmas](#)/New Year holiday is not significant enough in itself to act as a protective factor," he says.

“For this group the desire to end their life by suicide is so powerful, they believe that completing the act means they will no longer be a burden to themselves, their family or others.”

If you are concerned for the [mental health](#) of a friend or family member Professor Procter suggests:

- Reach out to people who you know are isolated and vulnerable.
- Let them know you care and that they are important to you.
- Try starting a conversation with the person, telling them you are concerned.
- Help them come around to the idea that while many people can feel this way when faced with a crisis, there are options and their safety is most important.
- A ‘no secrets’ policy is critical, never agree to keep someone’s suicidal thoughts a secret.

To get a better understanding of the person’s risk you could ask the following questions:

What: do you have a suicide plan?

How: Do you have access to the means to end your life?

When: Have you set aside a time to complete suicide?

The above tips have been adapted from livingisforeveryone.com.au

Provided by University of South Australia

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