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Behavioral Health Administration

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December 12, 2022

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

Winter is upon us. December 21st marks the first official day of the season. For some of us, the upcoming months are welcomed, as they will include winter sports, social activities, and holiday festivities. For others, the longer, colder nights and shorter days herald the onset of the signs and symptoms of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). December is Seasonal Affective Disorder Awareness Month.

This month gives us the opportunity to bring greater awareness about this disorder, which affects millions of Americans. If anyone you know has significant changes in mood and behavior when the seasons change, they could be suffering from SAD. I encourage everyone to connect individuals to services and supports that can help alleviate these signs and symptoms. Please share the following information on the signs and symptoms of and treatment for this disorder:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/seasonal-affective-disorder>.

December is also the time of year we begin to plan for and participate in the holidays, including Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa. It is a time when communities can concentrate on celebrating their beliefs, traditions, cultures, and a spirit of giving.

December can also put increased pressure on our mental health. It is a time when some of us may experience increased stress, anxiety, and depression. This month often includes events that can be stressful, such as holiday shopping (and overspending), cooking, and cleaning—all the while balancing potentially challenging situations and conflicts with those around us (who may also be experiencing stress). Some among us are at risk of feeling more isolated during the holidays due to being alone, experiencing homelessness, or facing unemployment. As a behavioral health community, we can help support these individuals. We can provide helpful reminders to our community, such as planning ahead, being realistic regarding holiday spending budgets, avoiding numbing or masking feelings with alcohol or other substances, and taking time for self-care.

Among individuals living with mental illness, 64% feel that their symptoms increase over the holidays. So, wherever possible, let's encourage our patients to connect with family, friends, support groups (faith or community-based), and other services to help them cope and rebuild their mental wellness. Encouraging activities such as walking, listening to music, reading a book, or talking with a friend can help decrease stress, anxiety, and depression throughout the year. These suggestions may be useful for us as well as those we serve; please use them as needed. Finally, as we continue to educate and care for our communities, I am confident that we can help improve health outcomes.

During this month and every month of the year, what you do matters. Although you may not see the individuals who benefit from your efforts, they have a greater chance of living a more healthful life because of the services your work provides them. In addition, we are appreciative of the excellent collaboration and coordination that occurs among you. Thank you.

To you and our entire behavioral health community, I wish the best that the holiday season, and life as a whole, can offer. May you all have a prosperous New Year as we continue to build and sustain a robust, effective, and efficient public behavioral health system for all who are eligible. Season's Greetings!

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lisa A. Burgess, M.D." The signature is written in a cursive style.

Lisa A. Burgess, M.D.
Interim Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health