Narrator:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson:

Even if you love the holidays, it comes with extra demands and stresses that can be crushing. I’m Nicki Donnelson. Today on the Missouri State Journal, I have Rhonda Lesley as my guest. She is the director of the Counseling Center at Missouri State University. She starts by listing many of the stressors surrounding holidays.

Rhonda Lesley:

There are a lot of pressures that we don’t deal with most of the months of the year, but around the holidays we have gatherings where we’re meeting people where it’s either been a long time or we’re meeting new people, and of course, we all bring our own gifts and our baggage into conversations and financial stress certainly. I think, in our culture, there’s a lot of expectation to show up with a gift. Even with physical health, winter’s coming on, we’re dealing with COVID and that brings a host of stressors for people. Seeing loved ones struggling with illness can be really hard.

Nicki Donnelson:

For college students, Lesley noted, they have the added pressure of finals, or possibly, commencement in the job hunt. For some students, they will be returning home for the first time in months. She said to avoid some of the stress, those initiate a conversation about expectations. Lesley offers many manageable tips for coping with stress and prioritizing your mental well-being during the holiday season.

Rhonda Lesley:

Seeking support and togetherness at the holidays I think is really good. It's very easy to get isolated, ironically, in our very electronically connected world. It's still really easy to feel alone. Just choosing really healthy habits when we’re busy or when we’re stressed. It’s very easy to forget very simple things like including more fruits and vegetables in our diet, and maybe avoiding the fast food for a little while, drinking more water, staying hydrated makes us feel better, getting the recommended at least seven hours is what most people need. Some people need even more than that. Some people don’t feel refreshed until they get nine hours of sleep. But making sure you get enough sleep where you’re feeling refreshed and resilient. Setting reasonable standards for yourself. It's real easy to be a perfectionist at the holidays and maybe a lot of the time, but really stepping back and kind of readjusting and considering what’s really good enough. Setting boundaries as well. Knowing your own limits and staying within those. Maybe sitting down and writing out what your goals are or what your struggles are, and then coming up with a plan to counter those or find an anecdote for whatever it is you’re struggling with. And I would say even practice being alone. Maybe turn the TV off and turn the electronics off and meditate or deep breathe. Reflecting on what you’re grateful for is a wonderful activity. It definitely boosts your mood. The research has shown if you do that on a regular basis it literally lifts your mood almost as strongly as an antidepressant or as counseling if you do that over a period of weeks and make it an intentional practice.

Nicki Donnelson:

For those who’ve lost a loved one, Lesley suggests finding a way to honor them during the season. Perhaps with a new tradition. Another option is to reach out and help someone else which can help all party’s involved. She also suggests finding a way to increase your acceptance and tolerance of the people you’ll be spending time with. Beyond holiday stress though, Lesley works to decrease stigma and improve mental health resources. One way Missouri State is doing that is by partnering with the JED Campus Initiative.

Rhonda Lesley:

It’s an exciting opportunity for Missouri State as whole to look at our own mental health climate and to improve that. It's really all about meeting really high quality standards for mental health on campus and it’s a four year process. We have strategic goals that kind of guide us in how we’re going to improve our own mental health climate. We have a lofty goal of educating 30-50% of the entire campus on mental health intervention, and this is at a basic level. This is not at the level of a counselor. This is any of us walking around, can have that conversation comfortably, hopefully we can learn to have that conversation comfortably, so that we can help somebody in need of mental health support. Learning how to ask them if they’re okay, and if not, learning the right phrases, the right way to inquire a little bit more so you can find out what kind of support that they need, and then providing that referral. So, that’s just one of many opportunities that we have for improving the mental health climate here on campus.

Nicki Donnelson:

If you or someone else needs help, Lesley says now is the time.

Rhonda Lesley:

If you’re still struggling, like you’ve tried all of these things that we’ve talked about and you’re still not able to feel good, then I think it’s time, and maybe even before that, to consider professional help. And that would be reaching out to either a nurse or doctor, counselor, psychologist, somebody with that professional knowledge that can hopefully help you develop a plan that’s going to work for you over time. The studies show that the sooner you get in, the faster you’re going to feel better.

Nicki Donnelson:

That was Rhonda Lesley. I’m Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Narrator:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.