

Life Lessons from the Snowflakes

Wow-what a winter! There is so much to share. Until the recent snow storms I was going to address gambling addictions and National Problem Gambling Awareness Week in this column. Now I feel compelled to discuss some of the psychological implications of winter. Maybe there is a way to get information on both of these timely topics to you.

I had planned to share that National Problem Gambling Awareness Week takes place next week March 7-13, 2010. I was also planning to tell you that confidential help for problem gamblers and their loved ones may be found by calling 1-800 GAMBLER! Well, at least the storm didn't totally destroy my plans!

Winter months can be difficult since many people are isolated from their normal activities. This isolation can be psychologically challenging and punishing at times. Unfortunately it is a reality for many in our communities. Isolation feeds depression, loneliness, and the winter blues. The therapeutic value of human interaction can not be overstated.

I encourage you to routinely check on shut-ins and your neighbors. I remember what a difference my Grandma felt when a visitor or phone call came. At times she would tell me or another one of my siblings that we were the only person she had heard from all day. Sadly, people of all ages can experience painful isolation during the winter.

The winter months are especially hard on those suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder, commonly referred to as SAD. Those suffering with SAD are especially light sensitive and the days with shorter periods of light are especially problematic. These individuals suffer with symptoms such as: depression, hopelessness, anxiety, loss of energy, social withdrawal, oversleeping, and loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, appetite changes- especially carbohydrate cravings, weight gain, and difficulty concentrating and processing information. Medication, counseling, and exposure to special light therapy may be helpful during the tough season.

Winter months can be a time of let down for some. Just months ago they were preparing for Christmas. The hustle was energizing. Families and friends were gathering. Loved ones were expected to fly home. Dreams were in the air. In January the excitement dies and gloom creeps in.

The winter blues can be minimized if we are intentional with our activities. Maybe late January is the perfect time to mail a family newsletter. Have you considered celebrating Ground Hog Day? A special effort can be made to include singles and widows in Valentines Day celebrations. We no longer can blame long distance charges for not staying in touch. Pick up that phone.

Sometimes we have to deliberately plan to combat gloom. Maybe we need to put up bird feeders and watch God's beautiful creation gather. Maybe we need to simply invite a neighbor over for a cup of tea or cocoa-nothing fancy. My Grandma Smith used to make crazy patch quilts during the winter because she frequently would get snowed in. This is a time to make the most of any situation, but if we are not deliberate we are left saying, "Oh I wish I had taken time to...."

Planning is a great stress reducer, but equally important is the ability to adapt to change. I know of some people who found out exactly how unprepared they were for an emergency as they had no heat, water, electric, or phone for days. They realized that they did not keep adequate amounts of food or medication on hand for emergencies. Some found it hard to ask for help. It was a hard lesson in emergency preparedness.

The recent snowfall and power outages taught us all something. Some of us slowed down a bit and took a look at beauty around us. Most of us were forced to look at what we take for granted. Others found out just how much they were loved by their neighbors. What lessons from the snowflakes!