

DEPRESSION AND THE HOLIDAY OF JOY

Sukkot is the Jewish holiday celebrating the seasonal harvest, G-d's protection of the Jews in the desert and G-d's constant protection of humanity. In the Talmudic tradition, it is referred to as a “z'man simchateinu” - the time of our joy.” It is regarded as one of the most joyful Jewish festivals of the year, and its celebration even includes an explicit commandment unique to this holiday: to rejoice. But for those experiencing grief or depression, that commandment can be very challenging.

Thankfully, Sukkot also includes the practice of building and dwelling in sukkot, temporary dwelling spaces in which we are tasked with eating and drinking, and encouraged to welcome as many people as we can to share in our joy and find peace in the community. Many synagogues and Jewish communities may have a public sukkah in which to keep the tradition for those who do not have their own. In this way, we are given the opportunity to think about other members of our community who may not have anywhere else to go, either physically or emotionally.





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In caring for other members of your community, it is important to know what to look for when determining whether or not someone may need your help and support. You may notice some or all of these behaviors in the person of concern:

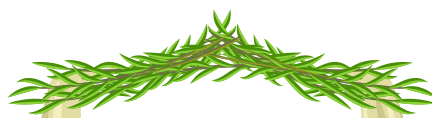
- Speaking negatively about themselves, others or their situation
- Acting unreasonably, without concern for others
- Abusing alcohol or drugs
- Picking fights, being irritable, critical or mean
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Having trouble at work or school
- Talking suddenly about separation or divorce
- Complaining about aches and pains
- Eating too little or too much
- Sleeping too little or too much



If you are concerned about a friend or loved one, you may want to express your concern and encourage them to seek professional help or resources. Try one of the following approaches to broaching the subject:

- Inviting them into your sukkah for a private conversation and limited distractions.
- Reminding them you love and care for them.
- Identifying the changes in mood or behavior you noticed, e.g., “I noticed that you have not been coming to synagogue lately, and I wanted to check in. You’ve been missed!”
- Offer to lend an ear and hear more about what they are experiencing.

It is important to remember not to be dismissive of them and their needs or to force them to join you if they simply aren’t ready. On Sukkot we build a dwelling place for others to enter, giving them space to be with you without expectations or reinforcement of their negative feelings about themselves, but we don’t force them inside if they aren’t ready.



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Families for Depression Awareness, a national organization dedicated to helping families recognize and cope with loved ones struggling with depression and bipolar disorder, have identified a few things you can do when someone does not want your presence or resists your help. These actions include:

- Providing consistent support. Over time, if you consistently show support, the person will see you are resolute and may accept your help. This likely will need to continue beyond Sukkot.
- Discussing your feelings. If your help is refused, restate how much you care for the person. Let them know how you feel, gently, by stating an example of the support you have offered and how it makes you feel when it is rejected.
- Focusing on behaviors. If the person is reluctant to seek help, then don't try to convince them a mood disorder is causing the problems. Instead, talk about your concerns related to their behaviors and the ways in which treatment can help. For example, after you have listened and sympathized with the person's feelings, try to agree on wellness goals, e.g., consistent sleep and feeling less irritable. Then, try to assign some action steps you can agree on to reach these goals, e.g., after two weeks, if the person does not improve, you will set up a medical evaluation.
- Encouraging professional help. It is important to make sure your loved one gets the professional help they need. If they are reluctant to see a therapist, talking with a primary care physician may be a less overwhelming option.
- Building an emotional support network (with contingency plans!). Enlist the aid of family members, friends and others who can talk to the person of concern.

What are some ways you can create safe spaces, or sukkot, in your community to let others know you are there for them, even when they aren't ready for it?

