



MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Updates and information from the Atlantic County Office

Wishing you a peaceful holiday season

NEWS & FEATURES

HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAY BLUES
What to do when the holidays aren't exactly uplifting

MOURNING HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

HOLIDAY PHOTOS AND NEWS BRIEFS

WELLNESS BULLETIN BOARD

SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER



A Tale of Two Christmases

Local mother describes a year of heartbreak and hope for her son who lives with a traumatic brain injury and bipolar

By **Beth Wade**
Public Relations Specialist

Note: The following content includes suicide and may trigger some readers. Altogether, Paula has feared losing her son more times than any mother should ever endure – once to a tragic car accident, then three more times to suicide. The first of those attempts occurred last Christmas season. The year that followed is part heartbreak, part Hallmark movie, but the story she tells gives hope to families with a loved one affected by a traumatic brain injury and mental health disorder.

Life following Kevin's summertime car accident and traumatic brain injury was complicated for him, his mother Paula, and the family. On paper, Paula recounts, he wasn't expected to survive after his car collided with a tree on a rainy night in a remote part of West Virginia.

Paula, a nurse, put her life and job on hold and relocated to the town where Kevin was living with a long-time girlfriend. Kevin needed support at home after 3 months of intensive care -- he had a brain shunt, feeding tube, fractured skull bone. He also had months of speech and physical therapy ahead of him.

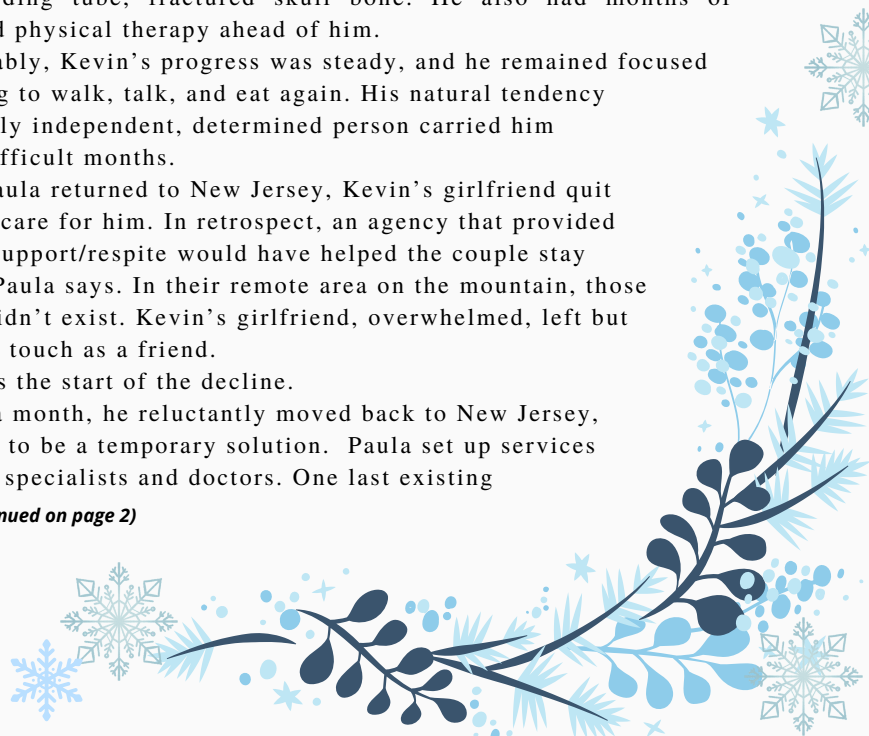
Remarkably, Kevin's progress was steady, and he remained focused on working to walk, talk, and eat again. His natural tendency as a fiercely independent, determined person carried him through difficult months.

When Paula returned to New Jersey, Kevin's girlfriend quit her job to care for him. In retrospect, an agency that provided in-home support/respite would have helped the couple stay together, Paula says. In their remote area on the mountain, those services didn't exist. Kevin's girlfriend, overwhelmed, left but remains in touch as a friend.

That was the start of the decline.

Within a month, he reluctantly moved back to New Jersey, which was to be a temporary solution. Paula set up services here with specialists and doctors. One last existing

(Continued on page 2)



appointment in West Virginia, hand surgery, was scheduled for December. Together, mother and son made the trip down south for the procedure.

"I think being there reminded him of all he'd lost," she said, "His girlfriend, a job in HVAC, his lifestyle."

As Paula was getting ready that morning, Kevin called from an adjacent room. He had hurt himself -- his first suicide attempt. Instead of having the surgery, he spent 2 weeks receiving psychiatric care.

When he returned to South Jersey, he continued to be treated for depression and bipolar disorder through a combination of Intensive Outpatient, Acute Outpatient, counseling, several hospitalizations, and a psychiatrist. During the following year, he attempted suicide twice more. And, twice more, Paula found him.

For Paula, the stress and worry for her son grew unmanageable. Flooded by a range of concerns, Paula struggled to leave her son -- she feared he would choke, fall on the deck steps, or harm himself. She feared Kevin's bursts of anger and rage, which would come unexpectedly, a result of his brain injury.

That anxiety might have continued except for an intervention of sorts.

"My husband told me that my anxiety was affecting my son. I knew I needed help," she remembers. "During one of my son's hospitalizations, I heard about the IFSS [Intensive Family Support Services] program and got connected to Gail," she recalled.

Paula said her relationship with Gail Christian, IFSS Coordinator, had given her a place to share her deepest feelings without reservation or hesitation. Paula had a great support system of friends, but last year was hard for them, too. They'd faced the loss of a loved one. And, so, Paula explains, it's so fortunate she finds Gail easy to talk to.

In addition to being a good listener, Gail offered advice on self-care which helped Paula cope with the overwhelming stress. Gail made some suggestions that helped Paula's son as well. She facilitated a connection between Kevin and a peer with the National Brain Injury Alliance.



That relationship helped Kevin turn a difficult corner in his journey.

Looking back over the past year, she's grateful for so much -- boardwalk concerts she enjoyed with her son (he loves bluegrass music), a connection her son developed with a local minister, the progress she's seen in her son and herself. And then there's the relationship between Kevin and his father. Old wounds have healed. This past fall, father and son participated in a local walk for suicide awareness.

Individuals with a traumatic brain injury are four times as likely to develop mental illness - most likely schizophrenia and depression. About 28 percent develop bipolar.

"We are blessed he's here," said Paula. "I lay in bed and think about that. My family is blessed."

Today he can shower and dress himself. His ability to speak came back. Kevin's jaw has healed to the point he can enjoy a favorite meal, a hoagie, at his favorite spot, Ernest & Son in Brigantine.

Kevin is learning ways to manage his anxiety and mood swings (forgetfulness is particularly frustrating to him) through online therapy and video courses. A meditation app on his phone helps with his day-to-day wellness. And, Kevin is now connected to a nearby church where he attends Bible study and weekly services.

For Paula and her family, every accomplishment, milestone, and lesson learned are reasons to be thankful as the year comes to a close. The next hurdle for Kevin is an upcoming eye surgery to correct his double vision. A successful procedure would mean he could drive and gain back some independence.

This Christmas will be extraordinary in a quiet way. Paula and Kevin have decided to adopt a new holiday tradition. They'll volunteer at Sister Jean's Kitchen in Atlantic City. Kevin, who worked as a chef before his career in HVAC, still likes to cook at home.

This Christmas, a tree will be decorated. Paula looks forward to a simple, peaceful holiday, and a season that is associated with many symbols of hope -- and, this year, thankfully, Kevin is among them.

The names of the mother and son in this story have been changed to protect their privacy.

If you or someone you know could benefit from help from the IFSS program, please email gchristian@mhanj.org or call 609-517-8614.



NEWS Briefs

A Holiday Tradition



The nearly 170 residents of boarding homes who we support throughout the year receive holiday gift bags of hats, socks, and personal care items in December. Staff organized donations and prepared the gift bags. Pictured above are intern Jacey Caplan and Ashleigh Zappala; below are Emily McCall and Yvonne Tran.



Pictured above: Carolyn Quinn, one of 18 CIT instructors/special block presenters, leads a discussion following role play of de-escalation.



The December class of NJ Crisis Intervention Training, or CIT, is pictured above. The training aims to improve participants' ability to respond to community members experiencing a mental health crisis, which includes role play, education, and information on local resources. Among the 45 participants were professionals from the Veterans Suicide Prevention Peer Team, Special Services School District leaders, NJ Transit Officers, Stockton University Administrator's Prosecutor's Detectives, Sherriff's Officers, Atlantic City Police Department, Galloway Police Department, Somers Point Police Department, NJ Courts, Atlantic County Justice Facility, Legacy Treatment, and Operation Rise. MHA Atlantic is part of the local CIT leadership. Special thanks to Zion Lutheran Church in Egg Harbor City for sharing space with us to offer training.



What is it? ↻

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Seasonal Affective Disorder (seasonal depression), is a depressive disorder which follows patterns of the seasons. It usually sets in around Fall and Winter, but not always.

Symptoms:

- Depressed mood
- Loss of energy
- Appetite and sleep changes
- Extreme guilt or anxiety
- Isolation

Coping:

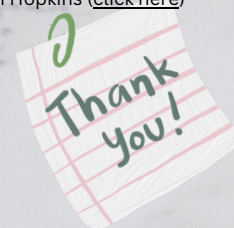
- Try to get some sunlight!
- Therapy services
- Setting realistic daily goals
- Exercise
- Self-care
- UBW support groups!

Myth versus Fact

One of the most common misconceptions about Seasonal Affective Disorder is that it occurs only in fall with the time change. Though fall-onset is more common, some people experience spring-onset Seasonal Affective Disorder as well.



MHA Atlantic staff member Abigail Hamilton, a Peer Support Specialist, contributed to the design content of this section. Content from John Hopkins ([click here](#))



*A wish for
hope, peace,
and joy
during the
holiday season
from all of us at
MHA Atlantic*



THANK YOU
to all the staff
at our office and
the United By Wellness
group facilitators
statewide
who provide extra
programming during
the holiday
season

Hope for the Holidays

What to do when the holidays aren't exactly uplifting

By Danielle Fritze, MHA Senior Director of Public Education and Visual Communication

For many people, the holidays conjure up a Norman Rockwell-esque mental picture of people gathered to enjoy food, friends, and family, accompanied by feelings of love, warmth, and excitement. But for others, the holidays can cause them to feel anxious or depressed despite all the decorations and festivities.

There may be pressure to impress friends and relatives with a spotless house or the perfect gift. The need to travel and buy gifts can strain an already tight budget. The crowds in parking lots, shopping centers, and airports are enough to send anyone into a state of heightened anxiety.

Obligations to attend multiple functions or visit everyone can be overwhelming. Maybe family time is tainted by unwanted conversations or a toxic relative. Perhaps the holidays remind you of friends or family members who are no longer around to celebrate.

And last but not least, some people don't have anyone to spend the holidays with.

Below are tips you can try if you find yourself stressed or depressed this holiday season.



Ideas to offset holiday stress

Set spending limits

Prepare ahead of time to end unwanted conversations

Honor those who have passed on with an existing or new tradition

Don't be alone if you don't want to (volunteer, attend local special event)

Say "No" if you feel overwhelmed.

Wellness Bulletin Board

Smithville Village
Christmas lights show
nightly 5:30-8:30 pm
Galloway



At the Library

Adult and senior crafts
Writing Group
Book Club
Crochet Club
Computer Basics class
Majong and MORE!

View the calendar on
atlanticlibrary.org or
call your local branch



Weekly Tues and Sun 8 am to 4 pm
Admission and parking are always
free. Donations accepted

Free Carriage rides in OC
Weekends thru Dec. 24
12 pm to 3 pm
Board at 6th & Asbury



Holiday helpers

The weather outside may have been damp and dreary last Sunday, Dec. 10 but a holiday visit to a boarding home in Atlantic City warmed the hearts of residents who made decorations, played games and enjoyed songs of the season...plus treats and gift bags.





Thank you to supporters of our annual
Boarding Home Holiday Outreach Program

Linda's Hats for Hope

Mr. & Mrs. B

Women in Mission of St. Andrews By the Sea

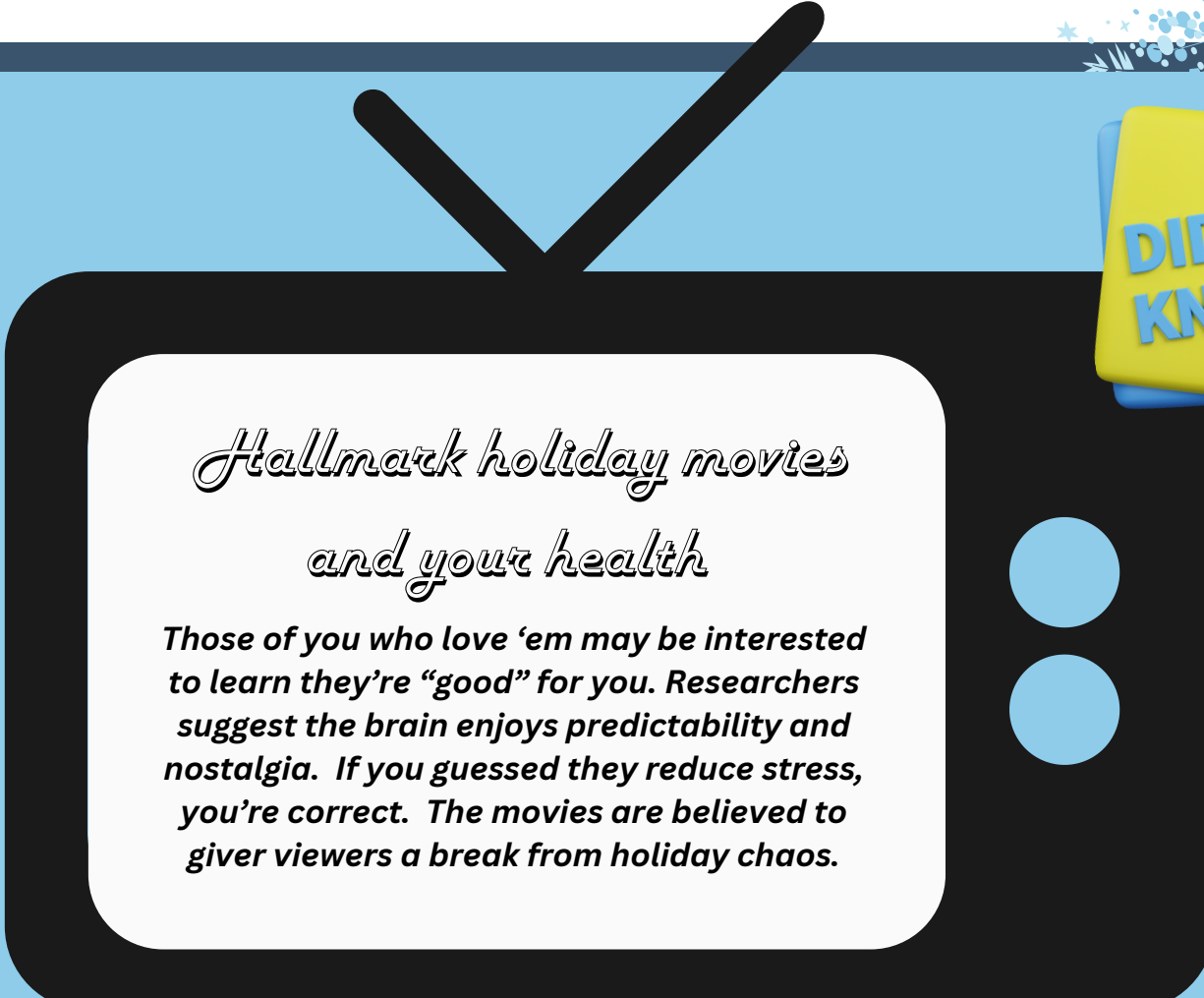
Susan Long

Bombas Socks

Anonymous

More than 170 individuals received holiday gift bags thanks to the generosity shown by the community and friends of the agency.

We appreciate you!



**DID YOU
KNOW?**

*Hallmark holiday movies
and your health*

Those of you who love 'em may be interested to learn they're "good" for you. Researchers suggest the brain enjoys predictability and nostalgia. If you guessed they reduce stress, you're correct. The movies are believed to give viewers a break from holiday chaos.



GUESS
Who?
B A B Y
PICTURE GAME

Cutie Pie



Use our website (mhaac.info) and use your amateur detective skills to try and figure out which MHA Atlantic staff member this is! Click on "About Us" and "Team" to see us as grown-ups!

(Vicki's idea! Note: she doesn't take bribes)



Each month, we'll show you a new baby face. Game ends when we run out of staff pics.

Everyone who participates will be put in a drawing to win a t-shirt. Drawing date TBA. The person who guesses the most correctly wins a gift card.



?

Who was Baby November?
That's Linda Bastedo, Family Advocate!



Mourning Traditions During the Holidays

When our holiday traditions change or a loved one is no longer with us, it can be hard to enjoy our celebrations. For many, the holidays are a time when traditions help us connect to ourselves and others and bring us back to the memories that are part of our upbringing. Often these traditions guide us through the end of the calendar year. However, changes in our schedules, families, or lives can make all of this more difficult.

We all know that our traditions are important to us on a personal level. They really do matter, even the small ones. Traditions are a piece of our culture and are a part of the foundation of our families and communities. They remind us of our values and provide consistency in our constantly evolving lives. They are deliberate actions that connect us to our loved ones and provide a sense of identity and comfort. In times like these, we need these the most. But the fact of the matter is some of our most consistent and loved traditions may not always be possible.

It's normal to feel a sense of loss when holiday events must be adapted, can't happen, or when a loved one is missing from the group. Change is hard, especially when it's sentimental. It's okay to be a little sad. Allow yourself time to grieve the loss of your typical holiday season.

To move forward, try to focus on looking deeper into the meaning behind these traditions and what they represent for you. Holidays don't need to look a certain way. Beyond the traveling, coordinating schedules, and planning that may have happened in the past, the true meaning centers on the connections and memories that we make during these times of the year. These connections help sustain and ground us.

Creating new traditions can bring meaning and joy into the holiday season. People are resilient and good at adapting. Though not exactly the same, it help you feel connected to your loved ones.

A meaningful holiday season is still possible. New things can be uncomfortable, but they aren't always bad – remember that your longest-lasting and most loved traditions were new at one point. There are ways to get through the holiday season without losing the magic that your traditions typically bring.

Some people find using “old” methods to show love as helpful and meaningful. Consider writing letters, sending cards, or even making gifts by hand.

Losing things we love, even things that don't feel like a big deal, is difficult. Expect some moments to be tougher than others – they may sneak up on you, so be gentle with yourself.

Content adapted from Mental Health America



Dear caregiver

You may feel
guilty,
afraid,
stressed,
hopeless,
resentful,
overwhelmed



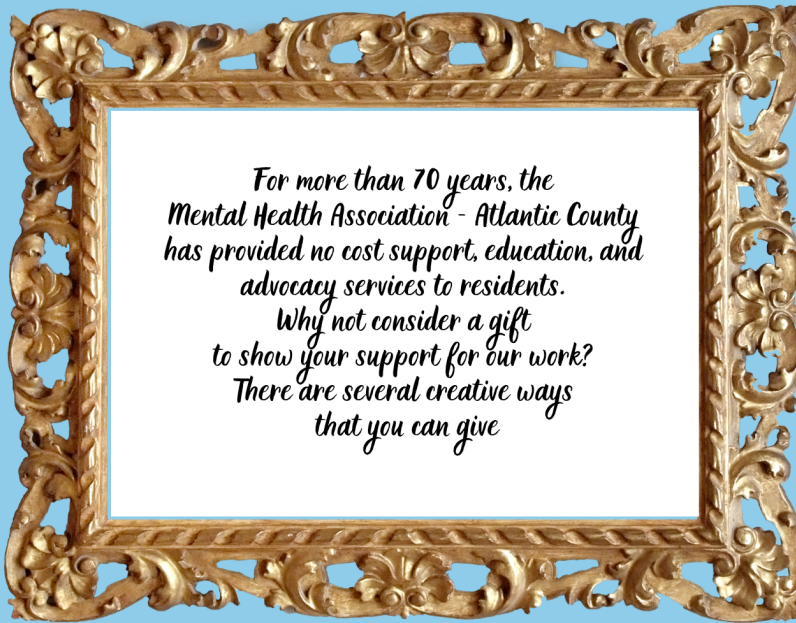
We're in this with you

If you have a family member who lives with mental illness, please join us for any of our online support group meetings



*Intensive
Family Support
Services*

609-517-8614
Daily, including weekends
8 am to 8 pm



For more than 70 years, the Mental Health Association - Atlantic County has provided no cost support, education, and advocacy services to residents. Why not consider a gift to show your support for our work? There are several creative ways that you can give

How You Benefit from Planned Giving

Planned gifts are charitable contributions that are part of your financial or estate plans. Including a gift to the Mental Health Association -Atlantic County in your will or trust allows you to create a legacy which provides families like you with the education, support, empathy and options to provide the best care for your family. It only takes 20 minutes or less!

You Get to Leave a Legacy

Making a bequest in your will is a powerful way to leave a lasting impact. Another way to leave a large gift is through establishing your legacy by making a bequest, showing your support for years to come.

Decide How Your Gift is Used

When you leave a bequest in your will to Mental Health Association in Atlantic County, you can allocate a program where you would like to make an impact.

You Get a Tax Break

Did you know that bequests can reduce federal estate taxes for heirs? And these deductions are not limited to cash — they can include assets like real estate, IRAs, and stock as well!



May this winter be a season of rest from the wheel of the mind



Adapted from a quote by John Geddes