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A blue Christmas

For many, 'tis the season to be anything but jolly

Tara Mallowney

Socializing with friends and family, the hustle and bustle of shopping, and Christmas carols playing everywhere - for most people, the holidays are a time for hope, renewal and fun.

But for many others, Christmas is a harsh reminder of just how tough life can be.

At 7:30 Tuesday evening, First United Church in Mount Pearl will hold its second annual Blue Christmas service, giving an opportunity to share in quiet reflection for people who find this season difficult.

"There are all kinds of different reasons why people find this time of year difficult," said Rev. Donna Lawrence. "For a lot of people, it's about people who have died in the last year, people going through separation or divorce, people who don't have family members around anymore, financial stresses or any number of things."

Lawrence, who held similar services in her previous church in Clarke's Beach, said the Blue Christmas service will be a serene one.

"It's one of those where people can participate if they want," she said. "If they want to sing, that's great, and if they don't want to sing, that's fine. There'll be some quiet music, some prayers, a little reflection about finding healing and hope in this sometimes hard time, and that kind of thing."

Although last year's Blue Christmas service didn't draw a particularly big crowd, there were enough people in attendance to inspire Lawrence to organize another one this year.

Even if there had been only one person attend, she said, she would have been encouraged.

"There were some that had been hesitant about going, but once they came to the service and they had that time to reflect, they realized just how desperately they needed it," she explained.

Not all happy

Geoff Chaulk of the Newfoundland and Labrador branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association said Christmas is not necessarily a happy time for those with mental-health problems.

But for many, it's not just the Christmas season that gets them down - it's the entire winter.

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada estimates that between two and four per cent of the Canadian population suffers from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression that occurs mainly during the winter months, when the days gets shorter and temperatures drop.

Although the cause of SAD is unknown, it is believed to be caused by a decrease in a person's exposure to sunlight or a drop in the body's levels of melatonin, and generally lasts between November and March. Women are more likely to suffer from SAD than men, and symptoms of the disorder usually present themselves between the age of 20 and 40.

As with general depression, symptoms of SAD include a low energy level, inability to focus or concentrate, a feeling of despair, headaches, increased appetite, oversleeping and irritability.

The disorder is a mild condition for some, amounting to the "winter blues," but for others, SAD is a seriously debilitating illness, preventing them from functioning normally and resulting in hospital admissions.

Treatment for SAD can include a mix of counselling, antidepressant medication and light therapy.

Light therapy - which involves a person sitting within three feet of a light box for a prescribed amount of time each day - has been proven to be extremely effective in many diagnosed cases of the disorder.

Chaulk said there are also other basic things SAD sufferers can do to alleviate their symptoms.

"Certainly, spending time with those that you know and love can help, and family can be defined by the individual, since some people may not have good memories of family life or childhood," he said. "There are some age-old basics - like getting outside when there is some sunshine, getting some exercise, maybe walking through Bowring Park on a sunny day - that can help."

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Rev. Donna Lawrence will conduct a Blue Christmas service at the First United Church on Park Avenue in Mount Pearl. - Photo by Keith Gosse/The Telegram

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