

Communicating During the Holidays with Alex Chan

Announcer 00:01

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Ashley Biggs 00:20

Hi, everyone, it's Ashlee from the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled and I'm so excited to have you back with us for another LBDP Guest our guest this month is Alex Chan. He's a mental and behavioral specialist from University Maryland Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Program. He's actually here to talk to us about stress management, family relations, the holiday buzz that happens every year during this month. His recent program development has focused on stigma reduction, mental health of farmers and community capacity building through programs like mental health first aid, he holds his master's and doctoral degrees in Human Development and Family Studies at Ashburton university. Well, sorry, I'm sorry, all burn, I apologize. Yeah. Alex is also a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Maryland and DC, he continues to practice marriage and family therapy with the simply group DC outside of his work at the University of Maryland Extension. So my goodness, you really, you really got in there to talk about very stressful things. Very quickly, can you tell us what kind of led you to talk about and help people manage their stress and their, you know, especially with family relations?

Alex Chan 01:46

Yeah. So I would say that my interest in that started back in college, I was, I was taking a psychology course, when I was, in my undergraduate years and trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to do some sort of counseling profession, but I wasn't sure exactly what kind. And so our professor actually brought in a family therapist from another university, who was a trainer of family therapists. And he did some exercises with us showing us like the kind of work that's done with family therapy. And that just really interested me, I just, I was fascinated by the idea of having multiple family members in the room at the same time and, and focusing on relationships that are unfolding right in front of you, versus working individually with somebody. So that kind of sparked my interest. And then over the years, I have translated that interest not only into working as a clinician, but also working with the University and trying to translate some of that material into an educational format.

Ashley Biggs 02:53

That's a pretty, pretty awesome segue into the topic, actually, that we're here to talk about today. Which is not exactly an easy one to talk about. We know that December, which is the month for that we're talking about, brings high stress, and even in the best of families, some of that family management that has to happen. The first thing I got to ask is, you know, coming from this background and this interest, what would be the best course of action? What's the what Where should people start? Before they go visit family before they go and, you know, rush around to do the holiday thing? What's what's step one?

Alex Chan 03:39

I think step one is thinking about if you know, there are difficult conversations ahead of you. So if you can anticipate that there's going to be a difficult topic coming up during the holidays, maybe there's been some kind of life transition that you've gone through, maybe there's been an event that happened to another family member that you know, everyone's gonna have to talk about, you'll want to think about what are those difficult conversations? And am I the one that's kind of in charge of initiating that conversation? Or might I be the one that is sort of like the one receiving that that invitation, you know, or perhaps unwelcome invitation into some of these conversations? So I would say step one is thinking about, you know, what's, what am I going to have to talk about? And why do I want to or not want to talk about that thing? I think that answering those questions will help you figure out some of the other issues that you can work on in between now and then. So for example, if you know that you need to talk to a parent about their health and that sounds like a really challenging conversation to have and, you know, what are their options for the future? You know, you You might want to think, well, you know, what are my motivations for doing this? You know, I want to, I want to show that I can, you know, take care of my parent, I want to know that I, I want them to know that I'm there for them. But then you may also think like, why don't I want to have that conversation? Well, it, it's scary to have that conversation, or I've tried to have this conversation in the past. And it didn't go very well. You know, so there are like interpersonal concerns that I might need to address in advance and start kind of preparing for it in advance. Does that make sense?

Ashley Biggs 05:36

Oh, it makes perfect sense. December is one of the hardest months, not just because of the holidays, but because so Winter is here. And I know from my perspective, some of the most stressful conversations I have are centered around health and guiding senior family members to a direction I'm hoping that they'll go in. With December also being a very isolating month, as well, I found that a lot of individuals who have these conversations stress ahead of time. So you say, you know, think about things ahead of time, why you want to talk about them, or you don't want to talk about them. But that could cause a lot of anxiety and stress. What are some coping tools that they can use to prepare themselves for maybe a difficult conversation?

Alex Chan 06:30

Yeah. So I think in preparing yourself for a difficult conversation, you're going to want to think not only about your reasons for having it, but also who are you talking to, and what matters to them. So I heard a presenter once use the catchphrase of, you know, thinking about what makes people tick, and what ticks people off. And so I love that, that kind of way of thinking about it, because that will help you prepare, you know, so what makes them tick? So for example, if you're talking to another family member about something like, you know, what's really their motivations, you know, and and trying to think about it from a positive perspective, something that they would tell you are their motivations? And then what takes them off? Well, what are the sorts of things that you know, put them on the defensive, and try to plan the way you have that conversation in a way that will reduce that defensiveness? So can you start up the conversation in a gentler way? Are there ways to modify the setting or the environment so that people are more comfortable in initiating the conversation? So I would think about that, you know, to try to, you know, plan ahead of time, and I would rehearse, honestly, you know, if you have a like, if it's a family issue, and you have other family members who maybe are sympathetic to you, you might rehearse with them about what you're going to say in advance, because they might provide you feedback on Well, I know, this is how that other person is going to react. And have you thought about this. So going through that conversation with somebody can help you feel more prepared. Or if you don't feel that that's appropriate, you could do that with a therapist, you can you can talk to a therapist about you know, I have this conversation that I'm really nervous about having, and I just need to practice it ahead of time. And that's a perfectly normal thing to ask of a therapist,

Ashley Biggs 08:30

I have to ask because this kind of brings up into another another point, because I think therapy is very important. These are people who are there for you when you need it. But I do ask the question is this month where you have got, you know, holidays, you've got stress, a financial situations and all sorts of things kind of going on? This is a big month? Should you delay having difficult conversations for sake of family peace? Or do you think that as as a therapist, do you think it's sometimes necessary to have those conversations when they need to happen regardless of the time of year?

Alex Chan 09:12

Yeah, I think the sooner you can have difficult conversations, the better because there's always going to be a reason why you could wait, there's always going to be a reason, you know, I don't feel ready yet, or I don't, you know, I don't want to rock the boat or I just want to have a good holiday or, you know, there's and plenty of those are pretty, pretty reasonable excuses, but they do have the effect of delaying certain conversations that must be had. And so in the meantime, if there's a misunderstanding that needs to be cleared up, it's still out there. You know, if there are decisions that need to be made, there's still uncertainty, you know, and so there's there's a lot more reason I think, to have the conversation earlier. A lot of times folks think that You know, for example, when I've worked with people who are struggling with something like depression, they'll say, I'll do this task when I feel better. Or all I'll start exercising again, once I feel better, and you're putting the cart before the horse there a lot of the

times because doing that thing will give you a little boost, a little boost, you know, your brain gets a little boost of dopamine when you check an item off your task list. And sometimes that's exactly what you need to feel better. So with these difficult family conversations, I think it's the same way you know, people, there is a good amount of preparation, you can do some of the things I've already mentioned. But then at a certain point, you just have to try and give this give the practice and you know, the skills that you've been building a chance to have their effect. Because if you keep preparing forever and ever, you run into the likelihood of circumstances, dictating choices or decisions rather than you being the more active participant in making that decision. Does that make sense?

Ashley Biggs 11:09

Yeah, absolutely. You mentioned depression, and statistically, the winter months cause a lot more depression. And holiday depression, holiday fatigue, holiday burnout, winter fatigue, burnout, seasonal affective disorder, all that kind of goes on the rise, what are some of the warning signs? Because I know, I know, for me, I know what I'm like, That's a, that's a Oh, I know what I know what's coming. And I can take proactive steps. But what are some things people can be on the lookout for, to know whether or not they're falling into depression?

Alex Chan 11:55

Yeah, I would say that if you find yourself withdrawing from your normal activities, that's a really classic sign that your your mood is going in that direction. If you find yourself really struggling to complete basic tasks, you know, even things like just getting up and getting dressed, then that would be a sign of depression, you know, lacking the motivation to do your your normal daily life tasks is a pretty clear indicator. And then there's some other more classic indicators, like just feeling hopeless, you know, if you, if you don't think if you as you imagine the holiday season, and immense wave of helplessness or dread overcomes you, that may not be an indicator of depression in the moment, you know, maybe actually some anxiety but feeling hopeless, is also a indicator of of being in that depressed state, so that the signs can be different to depending on the person and age group. So for example, a lot of times, for a group like teenage boys, you may see depression, express itself, and even younger children has more irritability, than flat out sadness, and that has a lot of explanation, some cultural, you know, ways in which boys are trained to express themselves, but you might see that irritability, as as a sign to have depression. So that's something to keep in mind. But I would say overall, withdrawal, and you know, absenteeism of any kind, and then difficulty performing your daily tasks would be clear indicators that some help is needed.

Ashley Biggs 13:39

You know, there are so many things people can do around depression and anxiety before they go see a therapist, what would be some methods or tools that they could practice on their own? If they're like, I know, I know, I've got anxiety. I don't want this to become depression. What can I do?

Alex Chan 14:02

Yeah, so I would say that one of the things to look out for and that you can actually practice addressing yourself is dealing with rumination. So when I say rumination, I mean, the thoughts that come back and keep coming back, and it's the same thing over and over again. And no matter how much you think about that problem, you can't seem to come up with, you know, a new solution or a new, you know, a new idea about it. So when people ruminate about the same things over and over again, that can contribute to experiences of anxiety or depression. However, I think it's one of the things that starts pretty early and that you can catch before it turns into something that really busts your mood. So, for rumination I what I always tell people is, first you have to develop the skill of thinking about your thinking, you have to know am I the kind of person that tends to ruminate when I make a mistake, or when I'm anticipating something that do I do, I tend to get stuck on the same thoughts. So taking a moment to think about yourself and think like, is that me? And if so, then figuring out what am I going to do when I catch myself ruminating? And I think there's a few steps that people can take when you catch yourself ruminating. And I think the first one is asking yourself like, alright, is this leading to a actual change in my decision making? Is this leading to new insights? Or am I just thinking about doomsday scenarios over and over again. So if it's not leading you to a new way of thinking or a new solution, then it's probably not a useful train of thought. And I'm not saying that all. repetitive thoughts are bad. But the ones that don't seem to go anywhere, that don't help you decide anything, those are the ones that you would want to interrupt. And instead, think, like, well, what does this say about me? Like, I keep thinking about this conversation that I haven't had yet with my parents. And, you know, I, I've already done all the thinking I can about it. Like, you know, I've planned what I want to say, but I can't seem to anticipate what they're going to say. That would be something to interrupt, you know, because you're not going to be able to precisely predict everything about you know, future interactions, you're not going to be able to cover every one of your basis. And so you'd want to interrupt that and say, All right, the only reason why I'm having this rumination is because I just want to restore a sense of connection with that family member, I just want to, you know, say something that's really important to me, I just want to be honest, you know, so try to reframe that rumination in terms of what it says about you in a positive way. Because a lot of times, ruminations are about problem solving. They don't always help us problem solve, but they show us that something is important. So that's not a bad thing. And you can sort of pat yourself on the back. It's like, okay, the only reason I'm having this rumination is because I care. And that's not a bad thing. But it's also okay to move on from it, because it's not really helping me right now. So once you've once you've been able to recognize kind of the good place where that rumination may be coming from, and that you're just trying to solve the problem, then it's easier to actually let go of it and say, If I don't attend to this train of thought, and instead, find a simple distraction,

Ashley Biggs 17:33

it will fizzle out on its own. Does that make sense? I think it makes a lot of sense. Because I'm guessing individuals, especially during this time of the year, as they're preparing for family situations, as they're preparing for winter. They may have an obsessive thought or two. Where it seems a problem is

insurmountable. And it does lead us right back to having having sometimes difficult conversations, but also setting your boundaries and your expectations. You know, part of stress management is setting boundaries and expectations with with the people around you. What tips do you offer for having because again, that goes back to that difficult conversation. But what tips do you have for for in the moment, I need to I need to set a boundary right here right now. Even if I can't verbalize it.

Alex Chan 18:29

Yeah. Yeah. So if you can't verbalize a boundary, you know, as as fully as you would like, just letting somebody know, you know what that's that is stating it in a way that's about you like saying, I need a moment right now. And can I can I come back to you about this? You know, so if somebody says something shocking, and you're like, oh, my gosh, I don't know how to respond to that, like that, that offended me so much. But I need to think it's okay to just be plain about that and say, I need some time to think about that, you know, Can I can I talk to you later. And then if you are able to verbalize it a lot of times, using some kind of pre empathy towards the other person, like trying to see that, oh, maybe they didn't, you know, I'm not going to assume that you were trying to hurt me, you know, I trying to show the other person that even though you're drawing a boundary, that you don't think that like they're a bad person, you know, because that's going to put them on the defensive. So, when I think about drawing boundaries, I always think like, acknowledge that, you know, the other person's intentions may not have been bad, you know, don't don't don't show judgment towards them, but also let them know that like, I don't want to be spoken to in that way or I don't agree with you, or, you know, can we keep talking about this oftentimes? You know, people don't give each other the chance to You try to keep a conversation going, and they don't try to be transparent about like, I want to change your mind. And sometimes just saying that out loud, may open the person up, you know, when you respond instead by just debating, like somebody says something you don't agree with, and then you just immediately start the debate, they're already going to be defensive. But you reduce some of that defensiveness by saying, hey, you know, I'm not sure I agree about that, can I just try to change your mind? You know, and approach it that way, as if it's, you're accepting the fact that you have differences. And you're, you're offering them, you know, like the chance to say like, no. And then that gives you information about like, all right, I shouldn't waste my time with this person, or Yes. And then that sets the stage for a more productive conversation.

Ashley Biggs 20:47

I once read, you got me thinking about something called the debunking handbook. Oh, and I read in this this debunking handbook, which is a, it's not like a real book, it's like, what 20 pages. And it said, it was like a physical blow when you have to have a difficult conversation, and you're coming at it from opposite sides, and you're challenging someone's perspective on something that the brain reacts as if a physical blow happened. And as someone who doesn't want to cause pain to someone else, you know, you have to kind of empathize with their anxieties and their, their boundary boundaries to

Alex Chan 21:32

Yeah, I would agree with that, I think most difficult conversations that I deal with aren't necessarily about ideological differences, as much as they are about hurt feelings. And so people will interpret ideological differences as personal attacks. And so you know, because we don't agree on this political issue or this, you know, this, you know, issue in our society, whatever it may be, you think something's wrong with me. And so, you do have to respond, you know, and show empathy, like you were saying, in order to kind of reduce the other person's alarm bells. And a really strong indicator that, that empathy is required is if the conversation feels repetitive. So if you think that you're hearing the same words, same conversation over and over again, it's probably because that other person doesn't believe that you've heard them yet. And so if you want the chance for them to be more open to what you have to say, then you might have to be the bigger person in that moment. And really lean into what they said, and empathize. And empathy does not mean you agree. So you can tell somebody with authenticity, that you see how they got where they're at, you know, I understand where you're coming from, you think this or you feel this, because because because you know, and give them the reasons why it makes sense to you. And then they'll actually get the evidence that you heard them, and they can stop repeating themselves. And when, when they're not trying to make their point, because they believe you heard them, they become more open to hearing what you have to say,

Ashley Biggs 23:08

Wow, that's really impactful. You know, going from one impactful thought process to another, you know, winter is, is upon us, it's coming. Or if by the time this gets placed on on our podcast service, it might not it might have already snowed once, we don't know. You know, the repetitive thoughts also happened during that time. For those reasons, seasonal affective disorder. You know, just the fact that it's winter, and it's nasty outside. And I know things like sunlamps can help but what are some things that we can do mentally, to make us fit for winter?

Alex Chan 23:54

So, you know, with winter, I think a lot of the things that we associate with that are reduced activity, reduce light time, you know, and so that's, you know, that's probably what you're thinking about with the sunlamps and all that. I would say that part of staying fit, you know, for the winter time, is to try as much as possible to maintain your social engagements. I think that's partly why a lot of our cultural celebrations occurred during the winter. It helps give us a reason to stay connected, even while it's rather inhospitable outside, we get together we huddle, you know, there's that there's that literal and emotional warmth that we get from from gathering. So I think that, you know, calling your friends and trying to, you know, visit as much as weather permits, you know, during the winter times, because otherwise it's really easy to just stay inside and say it's too cold to do anything and some days, some days that may be true. But that doesn't mean you can't pick up the phone and talk to somebody. So I think that's one thing is maintaining social connection during the winter months. Also just thinking about your basic, you know, physical well being during the colder months, you know, if your physical activity relies on being outside, then you might think about, like, what are some of the things that can get my

blood flowing during the winter months that can be done inside even when it's too cold to be doing something outside. And there is such a strong link between exercise and mental health? And, you know, for folks who do rely on outdoor activities, that's part of your preparation is thinking, how am I going to transition that during the winter, so that I don't lose that source of positivity in my life. So yeah, social connection, and then just physically making sure that you're taking care of yourself, I think those two are can go a long way, and can be done in ways that are, you know, great, you know, they don't always cost money to do those things.

Ashley Biggs 26:13

My next train of thought kind of goes through, okay, I've tried December, December is a monstrous month, where we've got lots of cultural events, we've got, you know, separation from friends and family due to poor weather. And I've tried all the things I am exercising, I'm eating right, but I'm still not feeling able to manage either stressful conversation or things like that, and I'm considering therapy. What are some things that you would you as a therapist would say, Hey, these are some things you need to think about before coming in? Because we want to be able to help you.

Alex Chan 26:54

Yeah. So I think that you, you actually don't need to have as specific of a request for therapists to start to help you. I mean, I've had plenty of clients come in for their first session. And they'll tell me, Well, yeah, I need to talk about, you know, what's going on in my life. And there are certain issues, but I also just get the sense that, you know, I'm struggling in a variety of ways. So actually, in building the relationship, we use the first couple of sessions to identify what would be the most impactful goals. So you might just come in saying, like, I don't feel right, in my life right now, like, there are things going on, but I don't necessarily have a specific goal, or I don't know what's achievable. And that's what the first couple of sessions of therapy are for. So I wouldn't stress out too much about like, what am I going to say, at first, I would just think to myself, like, Alright, can I tell the therapist a story about why, why I feel the need for help, you know, the things that I have tried already to address my issues and, and the things that, you know, have may have worked, may not have worked, just just tell the story of your progress until now. And the therapist will work with you to formulate goals that are meaningful for you at that moment.

Ashley Biggs 28:16

Is it something that people can they have, if they've gone through those first couple of sessions? Therapy doesn't have to be a lifetime commitment, right? It can be no, because, um, you know, can you tell me a little bit about that, like, yeah,

Alex Chan 28:32

so, therapy, there's so many different models of therapy out there, some of them are quite brief, some of them, they are very much focused on the first issue that you bring up, and resolving that issue as quickly and practically as possible. And then, you know, if you're, you know, once that first problem was solved, goodbye, you know, you, you know, no need to come back. Other other styles of therapy involve a little more exploration of the past and patterns of behavior that may be contributing to the present. And they are, you know, what some people might call like, Insight oriented, like developing the person's insights that they can, you know, apply that insight to their current problems. And then other other forms of therapy are, you know, and especially in, I would say, in Maryland, and really in the DC metro area, there are, there is a pretty strong psychodynamic community of providers. And that treatment process usually takes a little bit longer. So you wouldn't just be in for a couple of sessions. And there's more examination of kind of more deeper internal psychological processes that may go back many years. So there's a variety of approaches Is no one approach is going to be right for you? No? Well, let me say that again. So no, every approach may not be correct for you. And so you can ask the therapist, you know, what is your approach, you know, because I, you know, my resources are limited or my time is limited, and I, you know, I just can't afford to go to, you know, years of therapy. And if that person, you know, says, Well, I use, you know, you know, I typically see clients for you know, this long, then you might think, Okay, well does that fit with what my needs are. So you can ask the therapist, what their orientation is, and how specific or broad their work tends to be. And you can decide what feels right to you. And you can pivot, you know, while if you're already seeing somebody and it doesn't feel like it's working out, you don't have to continue. I know that's a burden to change, but better to change to a better fit than to keep working with a style or an approach that's not really working for

Ashley Biggs 31:04

you. Again, very impactful. It's got me thinking here, you know, and, of course, I'm a question machine, I always, always have questions, you know, like, it just, it just always comes to be respectful, of course, time and energy. Are there additional things you would like to share with people who are listening about mental health, mental health, terminologies, Mental Health First Aid, you know, being able to slot that bandage on yourself? Or help a family member? You know, these kinds of things are kind of rolling around in my head right now?

Alex Chan 31:42

Yeah, I would say I think I would like to just make a comment on stigma and how what I've been seeing is, in certain communities across the country in the state, it's becoming easier to talk about mental health. It's not true across the board. But I am noticing that, you know, especially since the pandemic, there is more public conversation about mental health. However, I don't think that always translates into individuals willingness to admit their own problems. So I think people are more comfortable discussing other people's mental health. But it still feels embarrassing, or shameful to talk about your own struggles and to think about accepting help. And so I think that a lot of us are still dealing with a fair

amount of internalized stigma. So we don't necessarily go around shaming other people for talking about mental health, but we don't let ourselves seek that help. We think I should be able to take care of this on my own, I should be able to solve this without the help of a therapist, like, that would mean that I'm crazy, or some other, you know, bad word like that. And so, yeah, I think that during, you know, especially thinking about the holidays, and you know, the struggles that people are anticipating that you have to free yourself from some of those thoughts and say, Actually, that's not true. Like, it doesn't mean you're weak to seek a therapist, it doesn't mean you shouldn't have to figure out these things on your own. Like, if you're trying and things aren't working, like you deserve help. That's part of being in a society is being able to get help from people so you're not burdening others, you're taking advantage of what being a human in a society is so, so don't let those those kind of individualistic, you know, gotta pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Like don't, don't let that hold you back from getting help early. Because as a therapist, it's a lot easier to help somebody when they come in early versus when they've been dealing with a problem for years.

Ashley Biggs 33:45

Again, very insightful. You know, I think, I think I'm gonna hit the pause button here and say to our listeners that, you know, I will be providing some additional information along with our presenters bio, in the show notes, you know, this time of year is very, very hectic, because of the oncoming winter. And, you know, many of the things that go on in these months, thank you so much for being here and for really providing insight, and it's so hard to do it in less than an hour, isn't it?

Alex Chan 34:21

Yeah, it's a challenge. But I think we got some good information out there.

Ashley Biggs 34:25

I think so too. So I'm gonna go ahead and say thank you to everyone who's listened and stay tuned for our next our next guest hour. So have a great day.

Announcer 34:40

This has been a presentation of the Maryland State Library Agency. For links to additional resources provided by today's presenter, please visit the show notes. For more information on MSLA or the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled, visit Marylandlibraries.org