

USU Extension Urges Mental Health Awareness This Winter

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01/16/2026

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With winter finally settling in across Utah, Utah State University Extension's HEART (Health Extension: Advocacy, Research, and Teaching) Initiative members encourage Utahns to prepare for more than just cold weather. Prioritizing mental health should also be part of winter preparation.

Seasonal changes can significantly affect mental well-being. Nearly two in five Americans report a decline in mood during winter, and 29% say the return to standard time negatively impacts their mental health, according to recent studies. In Utah, those effects can be amplified by unique regional factors such as elevation, inversions, and rural isolation.

"Many people don't realize how much daylight we lose in the winter or how inversions reduce our exposure to natural light," said Gabriela Murza, HEART team member. "These factors can trigger or worsen depression and anxiety."

Data show that about 10 percent of Utahns experience Seasonal Affective Disorder, commonly known as SAD. In rural counties, where mental health services are limited, this can lead to higher risks for suicidal thoughts, substance use, and delayed treatment. For example, in parts of Carbon, Emery, and Grand counties, residents face long travel distances to clinics and fewer providers per capita than the state average.

To help address these seasonal risks, USU HEART Initiative members recommend the following:

- Reach out early. Don't wait for symptoms to worsen. Talk to your doctor or contact local mental health providers.
- Use the 988 Suicide and Crisis Line. It is available statewide, 24/7, via phone call or text.
- Find and access rural resources. Many counties offer localized crisis support. For example, Four Corners Community Behavioral Health serves Carbon, Emery, and Grand counties.
- Practice harm reduction. If you or others are using intoxicating substances, never use alone or let others use alone. Carry [naloxone \(Narcan\)](#), a life-saving medication for opioid overdose, available at no charge through many county health departments.

"Winter doesn't have to mean suffering in silence," said Ashley Yaughner, HEART team member. "Know the signs, support each other, and stay connected to your community."

The HEART Initiative recently shared a video on [Winter Preparedness: Mental Health and Substance Use Resources](#) on their YouTube Playlist. For local mental health and substance use resources, visit [211utah.org](#). Learn more about the [HEART Initiative's work](#) in Utah, including wellness videos and community trainings.

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