The Torch

Edition 22

Message From The Chairman

Dear friends,

Summer holiday season is here again, this time with a difference as we watch out for each other with the Covid virus continuing. As we wish you all the best with our festive greetings, we urge you to take the best of anti-virus protective measures, and above all to take special care not only of yourselves but also those around you.

In this issue there are stories of folks who have given of their creative best to enhance things and to find joyfulness in their environment and surroundings -- whether it's playing football or thinking of new quirks in credit card design. We are encouraged by such inspiration.

Our heartiest congratulations to Marie Heyns on her special birthday.

We have missed opportunities to meet and interact directly. So let me use this column to thank our board members, our management team and each and every one of our St. Dunstan's people for walking and working through this past year with us. I wish you all a blessed holiday with much happiness and joy in the new year ahead.

Dave

The Holiday Blues: Professional Tips on How to Cope

Even in years without a global pandemic, catastrophic weather events, and other 2020 phenomena, many people find the holidays stressful, exhausting, or depressing. According to the American Psychological Association, 44% of women and 33% of men surveyed feel stressed during the holidays. The holiday blues strike people experiencing the forced joyfulness and expectations of the season.

Common triggers include:

- Stress about family gatherings (even those on Zoom) that might devolve into arguments over politics or other sensitive topics
- Overspending, especially for people already feeling financial stress
- Pressure to create the most festively decorated home, bake professional-grade cookies, and find the "perfect" holiday gifts
- Our guide offers tips for dealing with the holiday blues -- or perhaps even overcoming them -- with advice from professionals.

What are the Holiday Blues?

The holiday blues, explains Fatima Watt, Psy.D., director of behavioral health services at Franciscan Children's, "are feelings of stress, anxiety, and sadness that surround the holiday season."

The reasons for holiday blues vary by individual. According to clinical psychologist Michelle Paul, triggers include "memories of lost loved ones, and with that, a sense of yearning or aching to be with them," along with "too high or unrealistic expectations for what things 'should' or 'must' be."

Holiday blues, while generally temporary, may overlap with more serious mental health conditions, such as seasonal affective disorder or clinical depression.

Common Symptoms of the Holiday Blues:

- Situational sadness
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability

- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Stress

Symptoms often begin in November and last until the start of the new year. The holiday blues manifest themselves in different ways.

Watt cites signs of the holiday blues as including "changes in eating and sleeping habits, irritability and fatigue, feeling overwhelmed and stressed, and not experiencing happiness and joy during once pleasurable activities."

Other symptoms may include anxiety, trouble concentrating, lethargy, and eating or drinking more than usual. If these or other concerning signs and symptoms continue beyond the holiday season, individuals may need to seek professional counseling.

Psychiatrist Leela R. Magavi, M.D., advises that if "individuals exhibit significant weight changes, paranoid behavior due to severe depression or anxiety, and are at risk for harming themselves, I encourage parents to seek help right away."

Courtney Tracy, licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), Psy.D., adds that "if their feelings begin impacting their relationships at work, school or home, it's recommended that they seek professional help."

Reasons Why People Experience the Holiday Blues

Several reasons cause people to experience the holiday blues, including:

- Unrealistic or Unattainable Expectations
- "Many individuals have perfectionistic traits and have very high expectations, which always seem to fall short," Magavi states.
- Memories of Loved Ones Who Have Passed
- Focusing on "grief from the loss of loved ones who are no longer present to celebrate" can trigger bouts of holiday sadness, says Watt.
- Isolation or Loneliness
- Watt advises that people "may experience the holiday blues due to isolation and loneliness and distance from loved ones."
- Feeling Overwhelmed or Stressed
- "Even if we keep our expectations in check," offers Paul, "there may still be a long to-do list, which can spread us thin."
- Financial Difficulties
- Watt refers to individuals "overextending themselves financially or being unable to afford gifts."

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Could Worsen Symptoms Associated With the Holiday Blues this Year

The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic only heightens the effects of the holiday blues in people who already feel lonely and isolated, stressed, and depressed.

"The surge in COVID cases right now feels frustrating and anxiety-provoking," offers Paul.

Other people look at past holidays with nostalgia, as many had thought the pandemic would be over by now.

"I have noticed an influx of people who are comparing last year's holiday season to this year's season and have also seen more individuals reporting hopelessness and helplessness when reflecting on how they held hope that by the holidays, life would have returned to normal," Tracy observes.

In addition, worries about gatherings and loved ones contracting the virus "make this holiday season more challenging than previous ones," says Watt.

Tips on Coping With the Holiday Blues

Our professionals offer their tips for overcoming the holiday blues.

- Look for Ways to Release Harmful Emotions

Tracy advises that "sharing your emotions with another person, talking to a therapist, writing in a journal, dancing around to music, painting, and exercising are all ways to release the emotional turmoil."

- Set Reasonable Expectations

"Challenge yourself to avoid the 'must' and 'should' traps, or the all-or-nothing notion that if the holidays aren't perfectly joyful, then they are entirely miserable," suggests Paul.

- Take Care of Yourself

"Maintain healthy habits, including eating, sleeping, and exercise," says Watt. "Lack of sleep and inconsistent eating can worsen irritability and fatigue. Maintaining healthy habits can stave off exhaustion and help us function at our best."

A light box can improve your mood during these dark days, suggests Magavi. Tracy advises that "excessive alcohol and/or drug use can alter our mind and our body's ability to manage our emotions."

- Acknowledge Grief

Whether you experience "grief due to the loss of a loved one, the loss of a tradition, or the loss of time and memories with your family," says Tracy, "honor what you're grieving, and it will help keep you connected to it."

- Focus on the Positive

Magavi says that "listing positive affirmations in the morning can help individuals start their day on a positive note. This could divert attention from self-deprecating thoughts and reframe thinking."

Source: Psychology.org

Scientists create brain implant that helped blind woman see letters

A group of researchers recently attempted to use a microelectrode array to help a blind person perceive letters and shapes.

The implant, which is about the size of a penny, bypasses the optic nerve and instead provides stimulation to the brain’s visual cortex.

By the end of the study, the participant could identify several letters.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 millionTrusted Source people in the United States over the age of 40 years are blind.

Although there is currently no cure for blindness, a new implantable device may one day become a useful way to increase the independence of blind people. The implant uses an electrode to provide artificial vision.

Although the device is in the early stages of clinical development, the first experiment in a human participant was successful. The results now appear in The Journal of Clinical Investigation.

The innovative study was conducted by researchers in Spain who collaborated with scientists at the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience in Amsterdam and the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

Phosphenes

Blind people experience a phenomenon called spontaneous phosphenes. Phosphenes are what blind people "see" when random flashes of light appear without any light entering the eye.

Sighted people can also experience phosphenes. For example, pressure phosphenes occur when a person rubs their eye. Certain drugs, ionizing radiation, and electrical and magnetic stimulation can also triggerTrusted Source phosphenes.

Although spontaneous phosphenes do not provide any functional vision, their manipulation played a vital role in the recent study.

Brain implant

In the study, the researchers implanted a Utah electrode array (UAE) directly into the visual cortex of the participant's brain. The visual cortex is responsible for processing visual information. The UAE consisted of 96 microelectrodes projecting out from a silicon base.

"A long-held dream of scientists is to transfer information directly to the visual cortex of blind individuals, thereby restoring a rudimentary form of sight," write the authors. "However, no clinically available cortical visual prosthesis yet exists."

The study took place over 6 months and included a single participant: a 57-year-old woman who became blind 16 years before the start of the study.

Once the scientists had implanted the device, the participant had a few weeks to recover. Before the researchers could start testing the device, they needed to work with the participant to ensure that she could tell the difference between spontaneous phosphenes and the phosphenes the team wanted to induce as part of providing functional vision.

Once they determined that the participant was able to identify the induced phosphenes with 95% accuracy, the researchers began training and started presenting her with actual visual challenges.

Training sessions generally took place on 5 days per week, once or twice per day, and for up to 4 hours per session. This continued for 6 months. The scientists synced up a pair of special glasses to the implant so that they could track the participant's eye movements.

Over the course of the study, the participant became able to identify phosphenes in a certain space.

The researchers found that it was easier for the participant to perceive the spots of light when they simultaneously stimulated more than two electrodes. Spacing out the stimulating electrodes also improved results in terms of letter and shape recognition.

"This suggests that the phosphene's size and appearance is not only a function of the number of electrodes being stimulated, but also of their spatial distribution," write the authors.

By the end of the study, when the team simultaneously stimulated up to 16 electrodes in different patterns, the participant was able to identify multiple letters and even tell the difference between some uppercase and lowercase letters.

Lead study author Dr. Eduardo Fernández spoke with Medical News Today about the research.

“I would like to emphasize that although our preliminary results are very encouraging, we should be aware that this is still research and not yet a clinical treatment,” said Dr. Fernández.

“In this context, the scientific and technological problems associated with safe and effective communication with the brain are very complex, and many problems have to be solved before a cortical visual neuroprosthesis can be considered a viable clinical therapy or option.”

Dr. Fernández is a professor of cellular biology and the chairman of the Department of Histology and Anatomy at University Miguel Hernández (UMH) in Alicante, Spain. He is also the director of the Neuroengineering and Neuroprosthesis Unit at the Bioengineering Institute at UMH.

Implications of study

The purpose of the implant is not to restore full vision but to provide a degree of functional vision.

“One goal of this research is to give a blind person more mobility,” says senior study author Dr. Richard Normann, a bioengineer from the University of Utah.

“It could allow them to identify a person, doorways, or cars easily. It could increase independence and safety. That’s what we’re working toward,” said Dr. Normann.

Dr. Fernández elaborated on trying to provide functional vision with the implant.

“We are not trying to provide [full vision], that right now is not feasible, but just to provide […] useful vision, for tasks such as orientation, mobility, reading big characters, etc.,” said Dr. Fernández.

“We have to go step by step and […] not create false expectations or underrate the challenges that still remain to be resolved,” Dr. Fernández continued. “In this framework, we propose that increased collaborations among clinicians, basic researchers, engineers, and associations of blind [people] [are] key to advance in this field.”

John Nosta, the founder of NostaLab and a member of the Digital Health Roster of Experts at the World Health Organization (WHO), spoke with MNT about the brain implant. He said:

“[This is] certainly an important step forward that builds upon the existing brain interface technologies, like the cochlear implant and deep brain stimulation for movement disorders.”

Conflict of interest

It is important to note that two of the study authors, Pieter R. Roelfsema and Xing Chen, are co-founders of and shareholders in a neurotechnology start-up called Phosphoenix.

Source: Medical News Today

The blind footballer making waves in Paris

The saying that – there is ability in disability can be said of Yvan Wouandji Kepmegni, a blind footballer who has looked beyond his current condition despite being blind. His blindness hasn't cut his dream short.

Born in Douala, Cameroon as a twin to Eugene Wouandji, and Yvette Wouandji. His twin brother Yven currently works in an economic institution in Paris. Yvan and Yven were born six months prematurely. They were placed in an incubator but due to the bad quality of the incubator, the twins got near-sightedness known as myopia – a vision condition in which you can see objects near to you clearly, but objects farther away will be blurry.

Yvan suddenly became blind at the age of 10 due to retinal detachment. The mom took him to France in search of a solution but to no avail.

The genesis

After two failed operations, Yvan and his mom accept to live with the disability, he got enrolled In the National Institute for Young Blind People in Paris, where he learned Braille – the language for blind people. The 28 year old utility player said he discovered blind football through the Institute for young blind people.

"I started learning the braille language – a language for people who have challenges of seeing (blind). I discover activities for blind people through the school. I didn't know that one can be blind and do a lot of things as sports or other activities.

"I use to like football before turning blind and that also made me decided to play the Cecifoot – Football for blind or partially blind people.

He began practicing at the age of 13 and joined the AVH Paris Cécifoot team. In 2011 he joined the French team, making him the youngest player in the French national team then.

In 2015, Yvan scored a goal that was considered the goal of the year in blind football against Germany during an International game.

Yvan has won numerous trophies, personally and collectively with his team. Blind football has taken him to places. In 2013 he was presented the French National Order of Merit. He has met with two French Presidents; Francois Hollande and Emmanuel Macron. Yvan is also a consultant for RMC – a spot TV station in France.

The 28 year old athlete have a dream to develop blind football all over the world and would like to start from his country of birth, Cameroon.

“My dream is to help blind people in the world, particularly in Cameroon, to improve their lifestyle, studies, to be able to read, learn and be happy to do what they want. They need to also believe in themselves for all this to happen.

“The authorities also need to assist, like the coaches and families. I will like to play with them, teach them Braii language and even donate some cecifoot kits and football.

How the game is being played

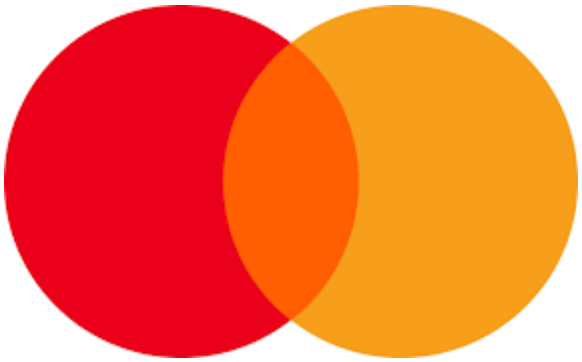
Unlike mainstream football where spectators make loud noises, blind football etiquette dictates they remain silent.

This is to allow the players to hear each other and, importantly, the ball. It contains a number of ball bearings that make a noise when it moves to allow the players to locate it.

The teams are made up of five players, four blind outfields all on masks (to prevent the partially blind from seeing), and a sighted goalkeeper. This is to make sure that partially sighted players do not have an unfair advantage. In blind football, the teams are made up of five-player, four blind outfields, and a sighted goalkeeper. This is to make sure that partially sighted players do not have an unfair advantage.

Source: Gaurdian.ng

A new Mastercard design is meant to make life easier for visually impaired users



The new Touch Cards from Mastercard have different-shaped notches cut into the sides to help customers who are visually impaired find the right card by touch alone. The Touch Card credit card has a round notch, the debit card has a squarish notch and the prepaid card has a triangular notch.

Approaching a register to pay for a morning coffee, for many, probably feels routine. The transaction likely takes no more than a few seconds: Reach into your wallet, pull out a debit or credit card and pay. Done.

But for customers who are visually impaired, the process of paying can be more difficult.

With credit, debit and prepaid cards moving toward flat designs without embossed names and numbers, bank cards all feel the same and cause confusion for people who rely on touch to discern differences.

One major financial institution is hoping that freshly designed bank cards, made especially for blind and sight-impaired customers, will make life easier.

Mastercard will distribute its new Touch Card — a bank card that has notches cut into the sides to help locate the right card by touch alone — to U.S. customers next year.

"The Touch Card will provide a greater sense of security, inclusivity and independence to the 2.2 billion people around the world with visual impairments," Raja Rajamannar, chief marketing and communications officer, said in a statement. "For the visually impaired, identifying their payment cards is a real struggle. This tactile solution allows consumers to correctly orient the card and know which payment card they are using."

Credit cards have a round notch; debit cards have a broad, square notch; and prepaid cards have a triangular notch, the company said.

Virginia Jacko, who is blind and president and chief executive of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired Inc., told The Wall Street Journal that feature also addresses an important safety concern for people with vision problems.

People with vision problems would no longer have to ask strangers for help identifying which card they need to use, Jacko said.

The new feature was developed with the Royal National Institute of Blind People in the U.K. and VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired in the U.S., according to both organizations.

Source: NPR.org

Birthday Wishes

Marie Heyns is celebrating a very special birthday this December. May all good and happy things come your way this year and the next. Happy Birthday

Blindness and The Power of Inner Vision

The book, written by Hilary Marlow has been uploaded to our podcast site. You can listen to it here.

Office Closure

We will be out of the office from 20th December 2021, returning on the 6th January 2022.
In case of an emergency, please contact 021 531 2028

From all of us at St Dunstan's, have a happy, safe and relaxing festive break