

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

[Why I Light Hanukkah Candles](#)

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In the northern hemisphere, daylight has been dwindling and next week, December 21st, will mark the winter solstice. In my hometown of New York City, we will have almost six fewer hours of daylight than we had around the summer solstice in June. Enveloped in cold and darkness, it's no coincidence that this time of year is graced with celebrations of light.



Hanukkah is the Jewish celebration of light, and the Hanukkah menorah is the quintessential symbol of this holiday. As we light the Hanukkah menorah for eight nights – tonight being the fourth – I am struck by how this holiday is filled with symbols and practices that shines light on what I believe and know to be true about mental health and recovery as well.

1. Lights of resilience. Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the holy temple after it had been lost and defiled. The word Hanukkah actually means dedication. How do we dedicate ourselves to find a way forward when something that is sacred to us is desecrated? When truths we hold dear are violated? In the moment, it is hard to imagine. For me, lighting the Hanukkah candles connects me to the universal story of humanity – the story of losing and reclaiming what is sacred and true to each of us. The candles are light; the lights are a reminder of resilience.

2. Lights of tradition. Life has a way with us, and sometimes we can feel lost. We don't know whether we are coming or going. Traditions function like navigational stars in the sky. Traditions connect us to the generations that came before and provide a roadmap when we are at risk of tripping in the dark. Traditions that convey meaning are woven into our lives and enhance our mental health and well being.

3. Daring to fight for light. When the Maccabees defeated the Syrian army on behalf of the Jewish people, they were few in number, limited in training and scraggly in preparation. But they had passion in their bellies. When it comes to mental illness, it can be challenging to know where to turn, what to expect, and sometimes near impossible to secure the help we need. Daring to trust our guts, daring to get the help we need, daring to pursue the light is the story of Hanukkah. It is also the story of mental health and recovery.

4. A little magic is key. As the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple, and the community polished the menorah that had been gathering dust for hundreds of years, they found enough oil to light the menorah for one night. But lo and behold, the oil magically lasts for eight nights. How? Why? Who knows. This has been perhaps one of the most difficult lessons for me to learn personally and professionally: sometimes we just don't know why. Finding light in the mystery is magical.

5. Light as hope. No matter who or how we are struggling, finding a guiding light helps. Perhaps that is one of the reasons the Hanukkah menorah is to be placed in a window. We count on there being light at the end of the tunnel. And in moments of darkness, we try to lighten each other's load. Somehow light is the color of hope, and hope is being able to see the light despite the darkness.

Resilience, tradition, daring, magic and hope - they flicker in the Hanukkah candles, twinkle in the Christmas lights, and light a path for mental health.