

Managing Holiday Stress During COVID-19

Is your holiday season going to look different this year? As 2020 draws to a close, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reshape life in many parts of the world. Travel complications and virus-related risks are causing many of us to re-think holiday plans, adding extra pressure and uncertainty to an already stressful season.

Logistically *and* emotionally, it is best to start thinking ahead and planning early for the holidays. This will help shape expectations, reduce uncertainty, and increase the likelihood that you will enjoy the holidays, even if they look and feel different than normal. Here are four tips that may help.

1. Assess risk and think about your comfort level and what you want to do for the holidays

Well in advance of the holidays, take time to think through the following sorts of questions. Your answers to these questions can help you decide whether/how you will attend family gatherings during this holiday season.

If you are hoping to travel, where will you be traveling from and to? COVID-19 guidelines vary by country, state, and even city, so it is important to be fully aware of the guidelines that would apply.

What would any family gatherings involve? Where would people stay? What would you do? Are any family members particularly at risk?

How are other family or friends assessing risk, and what is their comfort level? What precautions have other family members been taking? How seriously are other family members and friends taking the virus?

What is your comfort level with your own family's risk level? What responsibilities do you have to your immediate family members? Are any immediate family members particularly at risk?

What do you *want* to do? Are you planning to attend family gatherings because you want to, or would you mostly be getting out of a sense of obligation?

2. Manage family expectations

Once you have weighed the risks and decided what you will do, **tell family and friends what you have decided in advance.** This will give you (and them) time to express and cope with any sadness, disappointment, or frustration. In addition, you may want to plan alternative ways to celebrate this year.

If you know your extended family are likely to disagree with your approach, avoid getting sidetracked by arguments about things like the validity of science or why wearing a mask is important. Stick to expressing your own feelings, personal boundaries, acknowledging any frustration and/or disappointment, and agree to disagree.

3. Plan to celebrate differently

Think about your usual holiday traditions and rituals. For each one, ask yourself whether it is something that is meaningful to you or mostly something that feels like an obligation. **If it is meaningful, think about how you can recreate some version of that tradition.** For example, if there are religious services you would normally attend with family, you may all be able to attend that service virtually. If food is a large part of your holiday experience, you could plan to do a food exchange if you live nearby or share a holiday meal via video.

Also, **think about something new you may want to try this year.** This is an opportunity to branch out and do something differently.

4. Think beyond family celebrations and identify priorities

For many of us, familiar rituals and spending time with family and friends is a large part of what the holiday season is all about. At its best, however, the end-of-year holiday season can also be a time of rest, enjoyment, and renewal—a chance to regroup after a busy year and to think about the future.

Given all the disruptions of 2020, put some extra thought this year into how you can find and create opportunities for rest and enjoyment. Think about the following questions, make some notes, and then create a simple guide or to-do list for the holiday season that can help remind you of your priorities.

What are some things that you have been putting off or have not made time for this year? If you answered this question by writing down 25 household chores ranging from “clean out a closet” to “make a budget for 2021” *do not* tell yourself that you will accomplish all of these things during the holidays. You will not, and then you will feel bad about it. Instead, pick one or two of the achievable things on this list to accomplish during the holiday season. Leave the rest until the new year. Accomplishing *something* you know you need to do will give you a pleasing sense of progress, efficiency, and control. Not trying to accomplish *everything* will help you avoid feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and unproductive.

How can you be kind to others this holiday season? You may be feeling extra stressed or glum this holiday season. So are many other people. Think about how you can be kind or generous during this time. Can you donate some money to a worthy cause? Can you send someone a note, a card, a small present, or an encouraging message? Can you help a friend? One of the great things about being kind to others is that we often end up feeling happier ourselves, too.

What are things you would like to do, just because you want to? There may be a lot of things you *cannot* do this holiday season, so stop and think about what you *can* do. What would you like to do *for yourself*, just because you will enjoy it? Is there are TV series you would like to watch? Things you would like to bake? Books you would like to read? What fun can you find and make this holiday season, even during COVID-times?

How will you rest this holiday season? 2020 has been an extraordinarily challenging year. It is critical to take time to rest and catch your breath after seasons of extended stress. How can you help yourself *rest* during this holiday season? What boundaries will you put around work, email, social media, and the internet? What else helps you rest?

After all the upheaval and uncertainty of 2020, the last thing anyone wants or needs is for holiday season stress to add to the load. So, spend some time this week and next planning for how you can manage the “holiday season and COVID” stress, communicate with family, and actually enjoy these upcoming holidays. And may 2021 bring us all brighter horizons.