

Holidays During a Pandemic

A Survival Guide



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Table of Contents

1. Managing Stress in a Pandemic Holiday Season: We Can Still Celebrate
2. Holiday Gatherings
3. Managing Grief
4. Constructive Conflict
5. Boundaries & Limits
6. Holiday Budgeting
7. Self Care

Managing Stress in a Pandemic Holiday Season: We Can Still Celebrate

Holiday stress is not unfamiliar to any of us. This time around however; there are different stressors to navigate. Holidays are meant to be a time of joy, tradition and togetherness; however, this holiday season will literally be like no other. A few changes to consider are that traditions or activities that have been a staple in families may no longer be held. Togetherness may pose a safety risk for the vulnerable, comfort levels surrounding togetherness may vary amongst families and the pandemic has put many in a financial strain.

A prominent factor impacting this holiday season is the varying opinions and comfort levels people have surrounding the pandemic. We are all entitled to our own opinions and should practice a respectful approach to varying outlooks. In a time where many of us are swimming through a sea of chronic stress and not feeling like ourselves, the greatest gifts to offer one another are compassion, patience and understanding. A nonjudgmental approach to accepting our loved ones' personal decisions to mask or unmask, gather or "isolate," exchange gifts or save money, is a key way to avoid creating unnecessary stress. Remember that a person's decision is their own to make based on their personal circumstances and not a personal statement against you. Give yourself the gift of not personalizing it (making it about you), when it's really a decision based on comfort levels and means.



We can't anticipate all types of stress, but holiday stress is predictable; we know when it's coming, and oftentimes we know what pieces contribute to it rising. Overindulgence is a behavior that tends to escalate during the holiday season. Some areas we tend to overindulge in include, eating, drinking, spending, planning, decorating, cooking and visiting. We may start with good intentions, but the season gets away from us and soon we find ourselves overstuffed, overcommitted and overwhelmed.

Ways to combat “going over”:

- Determine priorities and cut out unnecessary obligations.
- Set limits and boundaries (e.g. on amount of time to visit, spending money or accepting invites).
- Give yourself permission to do less (e.g. only putting up one holiday tree this year instead of two, making fewer types of cookies, skipping the holiday cards).
- Predetermine an accountability partner who will ensure that you’re staying on track.
- Throw expectations of yourself and others out the door. Expectations lead to disappointment and stress. Practice going with the flow.
- Practice saying these phrases: “no,” “thank you, but no thank you,” “maybe next time,” “not this year,” or “thank you for the invite but I can’t make it.” It’s within your own “Bill of Rights” to turn someone or something down without having to feel guilty about it.
- Find holiday shortcuts by either crossing them off the list completely, alternating things by year or completing tasks on a smaller scale.

During times of stress and uncertainty, we tend to try and overcontrol things to bring a sense of stability and predictability. Try some of the above tips to avoid the overindulgence trap. Write them out and review them daily to keep your objectives in sight!

A moderate amount of “good stress” is healthy, even beneficial to us. Eustress is the term for good stress. A moderate amount of good stress is necessary to our overall well-being. This type of stress can bring a degree of zest to our lives. In fact, without it, we can feel bored or even depressed. A sense of urgency or the stress that comes with deadlines actually provides us the motivation we need to accomplish goals. And yet, too many activities, even those that are fun and enjoyable, can leave us feeling frazzled versus fulfilled.

A good motto to remember is, “All things in moderation,” or even better, “Some things in moderation. The rest I said no to.” FOMO, or fear of missing out, is a real feeling that people experience. On the other hand, feelings of calm, fluidity, peace, comfort, rest and relaxation are all feelings that are healthy and just as fulfilling.

This toolkit is to help you prepare for the holiday season ahead. The worksheets and reflection questions will help you think through and plan ahead for the season. You will feel more confident in saying no to people, places and things that make you uncomfortable, and say yes to the things that are most important. You can focus on just one area that causes the most trouble or dedicate some time to work through the entire packet.

Many of the topics below have a space where you can write in the name of the person who can help hold you accountable to your commitments. Having a partner to encourage you, support you and sometimes set you straight can be an invaluable part of this process.

If you find yourself struggling this holiday season, remember that your EAP is always available to help. Free and confidential counseling services are only a phone call away.

Happy Holidays!



Holiday Gatherings

My accountability partner: _____

What is my (family's) level of comfort about gathering during the pandemic?

Nervous Cautioned Very comfortable

Based on my/our comfort level, this is what I'm/we're comfortable doing this holiday season:

Family members at risk if we choose to gather:

People to visit:

Guidelines to keep self/family/others safe during visits:

Phrases I'm comfortable saying in order to decline invitations:

My Holiday Gathering Mantra:

A statement that's repeated frequently to help remind you of your gathering intentions. (*Example: "It's okay to decline in order to keep myself/my family safe" or "My decision to gather is mine to make"*).

Managing Grief

Holiday celebrations, especially those during a pandemic, may be accompanied by feelings of grief, sadness, despair or other unpleasant feelings. Here are different scenarios that might cause feelings of grief:

- Losing a loved one. Whether the death was around the holidays or not, their absence still leaves a void.
- Not being able to gather as a family for the holidays because:
 - You may not feel safe traveling;
 - A relative is in a nursing home and COVID policy says no visiting;
 - Relatives are too at-risk to visit;
 - My family doesn't get along.
- Holidays highlight what has changed in your life: a divorce, separation, a death in the family, etc.
- Going back to your childhood home may bring up bad memories, thoughts and feelings.
- For the blended family, reminiscing can leave others feeling left out or not accepted.

If you find yourself feeling down, distant, sad or any other unpleasant feeling around the holiday season, here are some tips and things to keep in mind.



1. **Acknowledge and talk about feelings.** Use “I statements” such as: “I’m feeling _____ because _____”. Simply being able to identify what you’re feeling can be empowering.
2. **Remind yourself and others that it’s okay to talk about loved ones** that have passed. Recall good memories and share stories about your loved ones.
3. **Be conscious about what you’re doing and why.** It’s okay to start your own new traditions and let go of some old. Don’t do things simply because that’s how you’ve done it in the past. If it brings you more stress than fulfillment, consider skipping it or replacing it with something else.
4. **Be careful not to get stuck on “should haves” or “if onlys.”** Holidays often inspire nostalgia and reminiscing, which can be healthy and fun, but no one can change the past and we never get to know what could have happened.

5. **Bring your grown-up self to the holiday.** It's easy for people to slip into old family patterns which can lead to feelings of helplessness, powerless or feeling out of control. Stay present by reminding yourself of who you are today and how you have grown and matured. Use mindfulness skills by focusing on what you see, hear, touch, smell and taste right now to remain grounded and present. Be intentional about taking the high road and acting with integrity, wisdom and compassion.

Ways that I can connect with loved ones if they are unable to leave their homes and/or travel:

Ways that I can honor and celebrate the life of a family member or loved one that has passed:

There is still much to be grateful for. These are a few things that I'm grateful for this holiday season:

Things have changed with the pandemic and how we do things, but a lot hasn't changed. These are things that haven't changed much, or at all, and things still within my control that will allow me to enjoy my holiday celebrations:

Mantra: Develop a statement that's repeated frequently to help instill strength in you during times of grief or sadness. (*Example: "I healthfully remember loved ones who have passed" or "I forgive others who have hurt me during past holiday seasons"*).

Constructive Conflict

My accountability partner: _____

Hot topics in the media, politics, criticism of your cooking, comments about your weight, poor time management, parenting, or the cleanliness of your home. These are topics that can lead to salty feelings or larger conflicts. As a general rule, think about leaving political discussion or other sensitive topics at the door. In the event that those rules are broken, check out these tips.

Things within my control to help manage difficult people and stressful situations:

- **Control your reaction.** You can't control other people but you can control your reaction to them.
- **Avoid personalizing.** When someone says something you find offensive, it's a reflection of them, not you. Monitor inner dialogue to ensure you're not taking it personally and allow the other person to be responsible for their poor interaction.
- **Control your alcohol intake.** If you drink, do so in moderation. If you tend to get argumentative when drinking, avoid, minimize, or switch to non-alcoholic beverages. Keep a positive attitude by focusing on positive thoughts versus negative ones. This will set the tone for a good interaction.
- **Engage in a purposeful pause.** Before reacting to the comments and actions of others take a little time to calm yourself.
- **Breathe.** Practice square breathing, or any other breathing technique that works well for you.

When faced with conflict, these things are within my control:

When faced with conflict, these things are NOT within my control:

Mantra: Develop a statement that's repeated frequently to help remind you of your intentions to celebrate a calm, conflict free holiday. (Example: "Breathe it in, breathe it out, rather than pout" or "I accept people for who they are without judgment").

Boundaries & Limits

My accountability partner: _____

Tips on being assertive during holiday planning:

- **Be clear and specific** about your limits. For example, “I will not be guilted into bringing the cookies this year. I don’t have time to make them.”
- **Be firm** (but gentle) in stating what behavior is acceptable to you.
- **Use “I” statements** which communicate your feelings in a non-threatening way. “I feel _____ when you _____.”
- **Be skillful** in how you deliver your message. One-on-one in a private location is better than in a group setting.
- **Use the broken record technique.** Even after you’ve clearly stated your boundary, others are bound to beg and cajole. Repeat your boundary over and over again, until the message sinks in. Example, “I know you’re disappointed that we aren’t coming.” “I’m sorry, it’s just not going to work out this year.” “Maybe we’ll consider next year, but this year we can’t come.”
- **Be patient.** You may need to repeat your boundaries a couple times before someone adjusts to a new way of interacting with you.
- **Be forgiving.** Change takes time. It may take some practice for you to be clear about your boundaries and enforce them consistently, and it will probably take time for others to learn to respect your limits. Let things go and avoid holding grudges.

Phrases I can say to decline invitations (and will practice saying out loud until I am comfortable saying them to others):

Tasks/activities I commit to eliminate or avoiding altogether this year (*e.g. I will only bake three types of cookies instead of 10. I will only put up half of the decorations this year.*):

Shortcuts (tasks I commit to cutting back on):

My Mantra

A statement that's repeated frequently to help remind you of your intentions, keep a strong mindset, push you further, etc. (Example: "I don't have to do everything, that is ok").



Holiday Budgeting

My accountability partner: _____

Financial stress is one of the most difficult parts of the holiday season. For some it's a matter of self-discipline to reel in spending on decorations, food, parties and gifts. For others it's a matter of stretching money for holiday fun when it's already a struggle to pay the bills.

Holiday Spending Tips:

- **Challenge yourself to be more creative** in finding thoughtful but inexpensive gifts, clever but cheap decorations or budget-friendly ways to cut costs without cutting the fun.
- **Get tough with yourself** about setting limits that are feasible for your budget.
- **Leave guilt at the door!** When it comes to gift-buying, many people find this hard to do, as they feel guilty about not getting Great Uncle So&So a gift when he gets you one every year. Remind yourself that your budget isn't personal. You still love everyone the same, whether or not you buy them a gift.
- **Considering joining a Holiday Club at your bank.** Many banks offer these special savings accounts where money is diverted from your direct deposits to help you save up for the holiday season all throughout the year.
- **Set spending limits in advance** rather than trying to make sound decisions on the spot. Check out this [Holiday Budget](#) from ConsumerCredit.com. Then fill in the prompts below to consider how you can make wiser spending decisions in the months to come.



Gift Limits

	Name:	Amount to spend:
Person 1:	_____	_____
Person 2:	_____	_____
Person 3:	_____	_____
Person 4:	_____	_____
Person 5:	_____	_____
Person 6:	_____	_____
Person 7:	_____	_____
Person 8:	_____	_____
Person 9:	_____	_____
Person 10:	_____	_____

Creative ideas I have to cut costs:

Things I can tell myself if I start to feel guilty:

De-emphasizing materialism

Three ways I can practice de-emphasizing the materialistic aspect of the season and instead focus on family, self-care and spirituality.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Self Care

My accountability partner: _____

Self care is important for any season of life, but it is especially important during times of high stress. For many people, the holidays alone are a time of stress, but when you add in the dynamics of a global pandemic, well... let's just say most people aren't finding this a cake walk. There are many different aspects of self care, sometimes known as "dimensions." Consider the dimensions below and consider how you can be well during a pandemic holiday season.



Physical: Healthy diet, adequate exercise, good sleep, medical check-ups, regular dental cleanings, etc.

Physical goals during the holidays: *E.g. I will stick to regular portion sizes to avoid overindulgence. I will go for a walk after a meal.*

Emotional: Being aware of and expressing emotions in healthy ways; allowing self to feel sad, angry or frustrated, but using good coping strategies in order to not dwell in these mood states.

Emotional goals during the holidays: *E.g. I will carve out some quality alone time. I will use music to help regulate my mood.*

Cognitive (thoughts): Focusing on what's right rather than what's wrong; challenging negative thoughts by asking, "Is it helpful? Is it kind?" (If not, then coming up with alternative thoughts).

Cognitive goals during the holidays: *E.g. When I start to worry I will focus on what is in my control and let go of the rest.*

Relational: Being both supportive and supported in healthy ways (you may get support from different people than you give support); setting and enforcing healthy boundaries.

Relational goals during the holidays:

E.g. When cousin Vinny starts to instigate, I will remind myself, "I don't have to respond to that."

E.g. When relatives press me to visit, I will affirm my boundaries to avoid unnecessary contact this year.

Spiritual: Having a purpose for your life (raising a healthy family, making a difference, etc.) and being connected to something bigger than yourself (God, nature, family, community, etc.)

Spiritual goals during the holidays: *E.g. When I get bogged down by everything I "have" to do, I will remind myself of what's truly important.*

Financial: Pay off debt, increase savings and invest in your future. (Easy, right? :)).

Financial goals during the holidays: *E.g. I will set and stick to my holiday budget, without feeling guilty!"*

Occupational: A sense of productivity, accomplishment and making a difference. This may be via a paid job or unpaid volunteering.

Occupational goals during the holidays: *E.g. I will make a difference in people's lives by volunteering this holiday season."*

Environmental: Feeling safe, having all needs met, having a comfortable space where you can relax.

Environmental goals during the holidays: *E.g. I will decorate the house only to the extent that it creates feelings of happiness and joy. I will not push myself too hard.*

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Services are free and confidential.



