

Unwrapping Wellness: Managing Holidays and Mental Health



From the hustle and bustle of preparations to expectations around social gatherings and gift-giving, there are many challenges that can impact our mental health during the holidays. Research on holidays and mental health finds 68% of people feel financially strained, 66% feel lonely, and 63% feel under pressure during this time

of year. Forty percent of people who already struggle with a mental health condition say the holidays make their condition “a lot” or “somewhat” worse. Learning ways to safeguard your mental health during the holidays can help you navigate the season with resilience and enjoy this time of year.

Why does mental health suffer around the holidays?

Throwing the perfect party, giving the best gift, preparing large meals—the holidays come with a lot of pressure, and as those pressures rise so do feelings of stress and overwhelm that can impact our mental health. Naturally, we want to feel like we’re part of the culture and community around us, so we may start to chase those expectations. And with the holidays seeming to start sooner every year, we may experience stress, holiday anxiety, or holiday depression because we’re chasing a target that feels like it’s always moving.

Some other contributors to holiday blues and other mental health challenges include:

Loneliness

A common message about the holidays is that it’s a season of togetherness. If you don’t have a close family or you have complicated relationships with loved ones, you may feel isolated rather than joyful—and it may seem easier to withdraw than engage, which can compound loneliness.

High expectations

The holidays come with societal pressures around decorating, meals, gift-giving, and socializing, which can feed anxiety.



Grief

Holidays may trigger memories of people we've lost. While these memories can be fond and comforting, they can also be a painful reminder of those no longer with us.

Financial worries

Financial stress is common during the holidays and can contribute to feelings of anxiety and shame, especially when we feel we must meet expectations from holidays past or keep up with others' holiday spending habits.

Seasonal affective disorder

Seasonal affective disorder often creeps in during the winter months from reduced sunlight, bringing on feelings of depression and zapping motivation. This can be a double whammy during the holiday season when you're expected to be joyful.

10 tips for managing your mental health during the holidays

As the holiday season approaches, it's important to tend to your mental well-being. Here are some tips to help you address challenges around the holidays and mental health.

1. Practice emotional acceptance

Acknowledge your feelings without judgment. It's OK to feel a wide range of emotions during the holidays. Accept your emotions and validate yourself in the following ways:

- Say to yourself, "I feel X because of Y, and that's OK."
- Focus your attention on the here and now.
- Notice your emotions and how they feel in your body.
- Observe a situation without trying to change anything.
- Remember that feelings are not "right" or "wrong;" they just are.

2. Surround yourself with support

Surround yourself with people who affirm, support, and love you. A good support network can remind you there's still goodness even when there's stress or loss.

3. Start new traditions

Changing the way you celebrate the holidays can be helpful for lots of reasons, but particularly if you're grieving a loved one and the traditions you shared or if you're in a new phase of life where old traditions are no longer financially sustainable. Doing things differently helps us not ruminate or hyper focus on what was, what could be, or what "should" be. There's no timeline on grief. It's OK to have two realities happening at the same time.



4. Hold boundaries

Boundaries serve as protective shields around holidays and mental health for our limited resources like money, time, energy, and emotional capacity. They nurture and support us and help us foster healthier relationships. Boundaries aren't just about others; sometimes it means saying no to yourself, like limiting your time or spending. For example, "I will only stay one hour at this event," or "I'm not spending money on gifts that aren't in my budget."

5. Make choices that align with your values

Make choices based on your values—rather than emotions—to guide your behavior. While you can't control outcomes, you can feel proud of how you respond. When you feel overwhelmed, take a moment to think of how you want to respond. For instance, if a family member upsets you, take a break or breathe deeply instead of responding with a knee-jerk reaction out of anger.

6. Set realistic expectations

You can't do everything, so avoid overcommitting or putting pressure on yourself to make the holidays "perfect" for others. This allows you to actually enjoy the holiday season in meaningful ways for yourself. Try not to get caught up in what's not happening, what needs to get done, what you don't have, and what standards you're not meeting. Practice self-compassion, know your emotional, financial, and energy capacity, and bring yourself back to the present moment when you feel like you're not doing enough.

7. Give yourself grace

Let go of perfectionism and the belief you must perform or meet others' needs and standards during the holidays. Give yourself grace and recognize that you're only one person with 24 hours in a day and with X amount of money in the bank, and that's OK regardless of what others may think or feel. Affirm yourself and watch out for judgment or self-criticism.

8. Use consequential thinking

Consider potential outcomes when you're faced with a decision. If you find yourself saying yes to something when deep down you want to say no, take a moment to reflect. Think about how that decision might make you feel and what ripple effects it could have in the long run. Hit the pause button before committing to something that could end up causing more distress in the future. It's not always easy in the heat of the moment, but practicing it can be incredibly valuable, even in seemingly simple situations.

9. Practice self-care

Check in with yourself regularly to take stock of your mental health during the holidays. Engage in activities that promote your well-being and avoid self-medicating with alcohol and drugs, which can amplify holiday anxiety and holiday depression. Self-care may include:

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- Setting boundaries
- Taking breaks (including paid time off)
- Exercising regularly
- Engaging in hobbies and interests
- Eating nutritious food
- Getting the right amount and quality of sleep
- Socializing with people you enjoy

10. Seek professional help

You don't need to wait until a crisis to reach out for help. Whether you're dealing with worsening symptoms of a mental health disorder or need to talk to someone about the stresses of the season, lots of people need support with mental health during the holidays. Therapists and mental health coaches can help you navigate triggers and come up with solutions.

Prioritize your mental health during the holidays

Be kind to yourself during the holidays. We're often our harshest critics, which can fuel isolation, avoidance, and self-judgment as we strive to meet unrealistic expectations or take care of our own needs. Understanding that perfection is elusive can provide a sense of relief and remind ourselves that we deserve patience, kindness, and grace during the holidays as well. Remember that mental health coaching or therapy is always an option, even as a way to plan for the stresses to come or in response to predictable holiday anxiety or depression. Either way, it's a sign of strength and self-love to reach out for help.

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