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# Surviving the Christmas, Winter Holidays and Festive Season

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**Summary:** The holidays are meant to be a time to celebrate and relax. They can also be an extremely stressful time of year. The good news is that there are things you can do to help you cope.

## Introduction

Ah, the holidays! They can be a time to celebrate and relax. But holidays can also be difficult and stressful, especially when you feel pressure to have a wonderful, perfect time.

The good news: there are many things you can do to help you and your family members cope with the holidays.

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

- **Keep up with healthy routines.** Holidays can be physically and emotionally demanding. Stick to healthy routines. Try not to overindulge, because it can make you feel even more exhausted and physically unwell.
- **Get enough sleep.** If you don't usually get enough sleep, then the holidays are a great chance to catch up on some Z's by going to bed earlier.
- **Get outside.** If you don't usually get fresh air, now's your chance to get outside for a walk. Studies show that even with bad weather, we get health benefits from being outside. As the Swedes say, "There's no bad weather, just bad clothing." In other words, dress more warmly. Consider asking someone else to go for a walk with you. There's a good chance they want to do the same thing.
- **Eat properly.** Are you going to a holiday party? Before going, eat enough so that you aren't starving and can resist not-so-healthy foods. If you do arrive hungry, get a small plate and fill up on veggies and fruit first.
- **Limit alcohol.** Social gatherings can tempt us to indulge in alcohol, especially if there's pressure from others. If you feel pressured, be ready to say: "Thanks, but I'm good." "Thanks, but I'm driving." "Thanks, but I think I'm coming down with something." "Thanks, but I'm getting over a bad flu so I need to take it easy."
- **If you overindulge and stay up too late, forgive yourself.** Instead of feeling guilty or self-critical,

accept that you're imperfect like everyone else, and move on.

- **Do special things for yourself.**
  - Go for a walk
  - Do yoga, meditate or use an app like Headspace or Calm.com.
  - Listen to soothing music.
  - Read a book that you've been meaning to read.

- **Be kind to yourself.** We all want to be loved and accepted by others, but in the end, the most important is to accept ourselves and show self-compassion.
  - Accept that the holidays are not going to be perfect. In fact, they may be even more stressful than other times. You may feel pressure to be happy, but it's okay to have difficult feelings, including sadness, anxiety, frustration and anger.
  - Accept that you are not alone. Other people are also having an imperfect holiday, and that's part of being human.
  - Are you having a hard time with the holidays? What would you tell a friend to help him or her cope?

    1. .....
    2. .....
    3. .....

    Now imagine telling yourself the same things.

  *"It's not your job to love me. It's mine."*
  *– Toni Bernhard*

- **Embrace rituals**. Holiday rituals can give a sense of purpose and belonging. Get in the spirit by decorating, singing holiday songs or volunteering to help those less fortunate.

- **Prepare for changes in routine ahead of time, so that you can avoid surprises.** When planning for family gatherings and social functions, consider asking your host questions so that you'll know what to expect:
  - How many people will be there? Who will be there?
    - What's the schedule?
    - Is there is a quiet place where I can chill out if things get overwhelming?
    - Make a plan for getting home (cab fare, bus routes and fares, etc.).

- **Limit demands and obligations**. Especially if you are coping with depression or anxiety, accept that it might be a challenge to participate in the same way you did in the past.

  Are you getting stressed from having too many social obligations or expectations? Do you have trouble saying no? When asked, you can say something like: "Thank you for asking me. I appreciate you thinking about me. I'll have to check my schedule." It's the holidays – you deserve (and need) a break to rest and recover.

- **Connect with others.** Holidays are a time to connect with others. You might consider calling up a family member or friend and making plans to get together.

- **Support others by just listening and accepting.** Are you stressed because you have loved ones who are unhappy? Do you feel that it's up to you to fix and solve their problems?

  Here's how you can support your loved ones:
  - Start by listening.
  - Accept and acknowledge their feelings. What we all want most is to be accepted no matter what.
  - Be comfortable with silence. Your body language can show your support.
  - When someone is down, accept and acknowledge their feelings.

    - Don’t start by trying to cheer them up.
    - Don’t criticize them for feeling down.

- **Be grateful for what you have instead of focusing on what you don’t have.** Human beings have a tendency to focus on what we don’t have. Our materialistic culture reinforces this: every time we watch an ad, it’s designed to make us want to buy things to make ourselves happier. You can break this unhappy cycle by focusing on gratitude. Think about all the reasons you have to be grateful, rather than focusing on what you don’t have.

- **Be financially responsible so you don’t suffer added stress later.**
    - Set a limit on your holiday, gift and food shopping. Remember that you can’t buy happiness!
    - Give homemade gifts. Nothing says I love you like the gift of your time.
    - Start a family gift exchange rather than having to buy presents for everyone in the family.
    - Shop online during the daytime when you’re well rested and not later in the day when you’re tired and more impulsive.

- **Learn about crisis resources in case you need them over the holidays.** Ask your health professionals ahead of time: “Where can I turn if I’m in a crisis over the holidays?” They may suggest a local crisis line, a mental health walk-in clinic or the nearest Emergency department.

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the Holidays

**Q. How do I survive criticism from relatives?**

**A.** First, take a deep breath, remind yourself that everyone has stresses with their family, and then:

- If your relative is being critical, tell yourself that deep down, s/he is caring, because otherwise s/he wouldn’t even care to give you feedback.
- Calmly use gratitude: “Thank you for letting me know.”
- Make an excuse to go somewhere else like the bathroom.

**Q. How do I survive being around stressful family members?**

**A.** Try to see things from their perspective. Appreciate how stressful life must be for them if they get so easily stressed out and/or cause stress to others. Be grateful that you are able to take life more calmly.

**Q. How do I deal with excessive materialism over the holidays?**

**A.** Remind yourself that the holidays are supposed to be a time to reconnect with ourselves and with family. Usually what your loved ones want the most is simply your time.

**Q. How do I deal with loneliness?**

**A.** In modern society, there is often pressure to be constantly doing something with others. Some people may feel sad and lonely if they are not.

When you’re feeling lonely:

- Do something special just for yourself.
- Invite a friend or relative to do something together.
- Seek out community or religious events.
- Sign up for a class or activity, e.g. yoga classes.
- Volunteer at a senior’s residence, a homeless shelter, a women’s shelter, a humane society or some other social cause.
- Avoid the temptation to watch movies or TV. Seeing all the artificially happy lives of people on TV will just make you feel depressed. And all the advertisements will trick you into thinking that buying more things will make you happier. It won’t.

Are you going to be alone on a holiday?  If so, plan something special for yourself in advance, such as:

- Reading the book that you've wanted to read
- Watching a favourite movie
- Making a favourite meal

If you don't want to spend a public holiday alone, consider volunteering on that day at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, or some other activity helping others.

**Q. Holidays are difficult because I've lost loved ones. How do I deal with grief from having lost loved ones?**

**A.** It's normal to feel sad, especially over holidays, if you have lost a loved one. Allow your feelings to come out, and cry if you need to. Crying is the body's natural way of grieving and moving on from grief. In order to move on, honour the memory of your loved one, and then find other connections (people and activities) that give you purpose and meaning.

**Q. How do I deal with the holidays when I have my own mental health issues?**

**A**. Dealing with the holidays can be particularly difficult if you have a mental health condition. With problems such as depression and anxiety, the holidays may be particularly stressful because of exposure to alcohol and large family gatherings. Having to attend large family gatherings and socialize may be sensory overload, and it can also trigger social anxiety.

Coping strategies include:

- Go to events when it's quieter; for example, arrive or leave early.
- Plan ahead to have a place where you can go to chill out; for example, go back to your car or to a quiet room.
- Do online shopping instead of going to loud, crowded malls

**Q. I'm alone on Christmas day! What can I do?**

A. Consider planning something special for yourself in advance, such as:

- If you don't want to spend Christmas Day alone, consider volunteering at a soup kitchen, homeless shelter, or some other activity helping others...
- Watching a favourite movie
- Making a favourite meal
- Reading the book that you've wanted to read...

## For More Information

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## About This Document

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