

Holiday Happiness: Don't Let the Humbugs Bite

My Holiday Self-Care Plan

There are many possible challenges during the holidays. What do you struggle with? Identify at least three stressors (they don't have to be on this list), and think about a positive way that you can respond to or get ahead of each of those struggles. Taking it a step further, think about how your personal best possible holiday might look. Use this as a roadmap to begin finding the joy of the season again.

Identify struggle #1: _____

What could you do proactively to reduce or eliminate that stressor this year?

Identify struggle #2: _____

What could you do proactively to reduce or eliminate that stressor this year?

Identify struggle #3: _____

What could you do proactively to reduce or eliminate that stressor this year?

My perfect "not so perfect" holiday

Which aspects could you embrace right now?

Which aspects might require compromise with others?

What will you strive to make true in the future? How will you do that?

Common holiday stressors

- Unrealistic expectations
- Trapped by traditions
- Family issues and conflict
- Time management
- Overspending or debt
- Eating or drinking too much
- People-pleasing
- Memories of past pain and loss
- Feeling guilty about level of giving
- Trying to accomplish too much
- Arguments with partner
- Children's expectations
- Committing to too much
- Being alone; feeling lonely
- Overwhelmed by guests
- Getting too exhausted
- Not finding joy in it
- Post-holiday letdown

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Coping with Grief During the Holidays

The holiday season can be a particularly vulnerable time when struggling with grief. You may feel overcome with sadness and memories of your loved one, particularly during events or traditions where that person “should” be in attendance. It can feel like being blindsided by your feelings. Here are some tips on taking care of yourself during the holidays.

- **Know that it's normal for grief to surge during these times.** Be prepared for the reality that times that used to bring much happiness may now bring increased sadness.
- **Allow your feelings.** To get to the other side of painful feelings we must go through them. A person who attempts to avoid or “stuff” these feelings may delay the process. Remember to also give yourself permission to feel good. Being happy doesn't mean you're being disloyal to the memory of your loved one. In fact, it's likely what they'd want that for you.
- **Plan ahead.** Do you want to spend the day alone or with others? Do old traditions bring comfort, or would you like to try something new? You might just have activities and people on standby and decide as you go. Arrange your schedule in a way that allows space to grieve if needed.
- **Alert others who care about you that this may be a particularly difficult time.** Look for supportive people to lend a listening ear: friends, family, your faith community, your doctor, a professional counselor, your EAP, or a grief support group.
- **Be mindful of sadness triggers.** Holiday music, a particular place, or even a decoration may trigger memories. If it seems too difficult, choose not to listen to holiday music or attend certain events. If it brings you joy, embrace it.
- **Consider including your lost loved one in some special way.** Light a special candle. Place a picture of them in a prominent place. Make a favorite treat that they liked. You might make these remembrances a new family or holiday tradition.
- **Be proactive about loneliness.** You may not wish to celebrate the holidays but try to find ways to avoid feeling cut off. Just being around others, such as going to a concert or shopping can help you feel connected. You might meet a friend for lunch or volunteer for a cause. This can bring a sense of connection and feel uplifting.
- **Try to stay in the present.** Reminiscing is fine, even comforting, but try not to stay there. You might try a journal. Write out memories and feelings, then tuck it away and bring yourself back to now.

Supporting children grieving during the holidays

- **Let them know that their feelings are okay.** Ask open-ended questions to invite them to talk about how they feel, but don't push. Let them know it's all right to laugh and feel happy too.
- **Give them opportunities to reminisce.** This might be sharing memories together, making a memory book, or coming up with a new ritual.
- **Give them some control.** Death leaves us feeling very powerless. Let them take over some holiday tasks or volunteer to help others.

Celebrating the Healthy Way

As the holiday season approaches, many people anticipate times of happiness, good cheer, and excitement shared with friends and family. However, holidays can also bring feelings of anxiety, stress, sadness, and disappointment. These tips may help improve your mood and reduce feelings of stress.

- **Eat and drink in moderation.** It's easy to find yourself eating more than you normally would because of the abundance of food. Try to keep your portions small, and avoid the richest foods. Watch how much alcohol you use, as excessive alcohol use can increase feelings of depression.
- **Have and stick to a budget.** Overspending can sneak up on you during the holidays. Decide in advance what you can comfortably afford to spend on gifts, entertaining, decorations, and travel. Make choices within the reality of this budget to avoid the stress that often comes with post-holiday debt.
- **Connect with others.** If you're alone for the holidays, find ways to engage. Try inviting others to get together, call a friend, or take a volunteer shift for a cause that matters to you. This helps you connect with people and get the benefits of lending a hand.
- **Make time for regular exercise.** If you already exercise, try to keep your regular schedule despite the busyness of the season. If you don't exercise, try incorporating some light activity into your daily routine. Even a short walk with a friend can help reduce stress and boost your mood.
- **Don't expect a perfect holiday.** Unrealistic expectations can add to stress levels. Accept that you can't control every variable. Negotiate new approaches to yearly stressors, then try to shift your energy into enjoying the days as they unfold.
- **Take a good look at your holiday traditions.** Are there any traditions or activities that can be modified? Complicated meals and elaborate gift giving can raise your stress and anxiety levels. Consider simplifying your meals and celebrations.
- **Remember lost loved ones through positive memories.** We can miss those who are gone even more during holiday festivities. Talking and sharing good memories of them and the times you shared can be comforting and keep the memories alive.
- **Find time to relax.** Re-energize by getting away from the pressures of the holidays, even if only for a short break. You might have a quiet cup of tea or take a nap, a hot bath, or a refreshing walk. What helps you recharge and feel calmer?
- **Plan ahead.** Not waiting until the last minute to finish holiday preparations can save you time, money and stress. Also, try making some fun plans for after the holidays to reduce the effects of a possible post-holiday letdown.

If you're feeling down or stressed, give some of these self-help strategies a try. However, if you feel down for more than a few weeks, or if you're experiencing changes in sleeping or eating patterns, talk to your health care provider.