

Mental Health America

Preparing For The Holidays During COVID-19

For many people, the holiday season will look different this year. Often, the last few months of the year are busy with parties and visiting family and friends. But due to COVID-19, things like traveling and gathering in large groups may not be possible.

Many people have lost loved ones and will be missing someone's presence during the festivities, and even more have lost their jobs and are dealing with financial stress. Others, like healthcare workers, may be working overtime and unable to take as much time off around the holidays as they usually can. It can be hard to cope with these kinds of changes, especially if certain holidays are the only time you see some of your loved ones.

If you live with a mental health condition, you may have an especially difficult time with the uncertainty and the change of plans this year. Many people with mental health conditions find consistency important in their recovery, especially during times of high stress - like both the pandemic and the holiday season. A sudden shift in tradition may have you feeling an extreme loss of control on top of disappointment.

Change is difficult for most people, especially when you didn't ask for or even expect these changes. But that doesn't mean that the holidays are destined to be a disappointment this year. There are plenty of ways to cope with the tough feelings you're having while still enjoying the holidays:

Identify How You're Feeling.

Figuring out your emotions about the upcoming holidays can make things feel less overwhelming. Most people are feeling a lot of different ways at once right now, which is hard for our brains to process and understand. This year has been a difficult year for many reasons. That means that some of your distress is likely related to things other than the holidays. It is completely normal for you to be feeling a bit more emotional than usual right now. Take some time to sort through your emotions in whatever way is most productive for you - you can journal, talk to a friend, or just spend some quiet time alone thinking. Once you have a better idea of the specific feelings you're experiencing, you can start making plans to cope with them.

Acknowledge What You've Lost.

While the holidays are mainly about thankfulness and celebration, this can also be a really hard time of year, even during normal circumstances. If you're missing a loved one, think of ways to honor them during your festivities. If you've lost a job or had to drop out of school, take the time to recognize the challenges that came with that. Even if you haven't lost anything concrete, we've all lost our sense of normalcy this year - it's okay to grieve that during this time.

Make The Most Of It.

There's no denying that things will be different this year, but holidays don't need to be canceled (or even minimized). There will be some things that you can't do right now, but there are surely some that you can. You can still carve pumpkins, send sweets to your friends and family for Diwali, make your favorite Thanksgiving meal, light the menorah, decorate gingerbread houses, and break out confetti poppers for New Year's Eve. For the things you can't do - brainstorm how to adapt them for COVID times. If you're disappointed about Halloween parties being cancelled, plan a small outdoor gathering, or come up with virtual games to play over Zoom instead. Feeling lonely because you won't get to see your extended family? Round up your cousins to video chat while preparing Thanksgiving dinner.

Don't Romanticize Your Typical Holiday Plans.

Remember that while your holiday season may normally be full of excitement and joy, it can also be a time of high stress. Long days of travel, endless to-do lists, and dinners with that one family member you don't get along with are all part of the holidays too. Even though you may be giving up some of your favorite things about the holidays this year, you're probably leaving some stressors behind too. You don't need to be happy about this - sometimes the chaos is part of the fun! - but be careful not to distort the situation and make it seem worse than it really is.

Practice Gratitude.

Gratitude is a major focus this time of year, and while it may seem harder to find things to appreciate, there is still plenty to be thankful for. Make a conscious effort to regularly identify some things that you're grateful for. It can be something as broad as your health, or something as specific as your favorite song playing on the radio the last time you got in the car. Change is hard, but it isn't always bad. There are still ways to celebrate the season with your loved ones, even if you must give up some of your favorite traditions. Find creative ways to adapt. Or start new traditions – they may even add more meaning to your holiday season.

If you're still finding yourself sad, hopeless, or unable to enjoy the holidays this year, you may be struggling with a mental health condition. Take an [online screen](#) to determine if what you're feeling is a sign of something like depression or anxiety rather than holiday stress.

