

## Holiday Stress



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*This expertise is provided by the UCSF Cope Well-Being and CopeColumbia teams.*

## **Making an informed decision**

It has been a long year, and we have been on a roller-coaster of emotional experiences. Many have experienced loss. Others are exhausted, enduring isolation and "pandemic fatigue." It's easy to feel defeated and give up on social distancing, but it is more important than ever this season to make the safest choices. It may be helpful to remember this is not unending, particularly in light of encouraging recent news about vaccines. We have also learned that when people are unified, even simple measures make a big difference in saving lives and avoiding painful lockdowns.

This holiday season is less likely to be "wonderful" by our usual measures, and many may feel it is just one more hurdle to get through—another of our many 2020 losses. We hope here to provide information that can help you make safe choices, cope with the painful realities these choices may entail, and communicate effectively with loved ones at this time when we need our connections to loved ones more than ever.

Concerns about surging cases of COVID-19 <sup>[1]</sup> across the United States in the winter months during a time of political upheaval compounds existing stress. The holidays can also compound the sense of loneliness for some, and they can bring reminders of all that has been lost. For example, some will choose not to travel and will face the loss of precious time with loved ones. This can be especially hard for families with young children and elderly grandparents who have been yearning to reconnect. You are not alone if you feel like your self-care plan has not been cutting it. In preparation for the holiday season and impending

winter COVID-19 surge, there is no time like now to refocus and readjust your strategies.

If you are not here already, a good place to start is to remember to ?put on your own oxygen mask first,? and then attend to others. Take stock regarding how you are addressing your basic needs: getting good sleep [2], eating a healthy diet [3], making time to exercise [4], and limiting alcohol [5]. Make sure to also support your emotional needs by first acknowledging them, validating your struggles, and telling yourself that you really are doing the best you can. Then also make time for emotional care?even more so than you have been doing during this stressful period. Specifically, we recommend connecting with loved ones virtually or within social distancing, joining online groups, prayer, meditation, journaling, yoga, creative outlets, enjoying beauty and nature, and practicing gratitude. There are many articles [6], apps [7], and videos [8] on our website to help if you have questions.

## **Decisions, decisions, decisions**

Be aware: this is a bigger decision than usual. It may require more attention and energy on your part to make this decision. The 2020 holiday season raises more difficult questions to navigate since traditionally these celebrations are marked by travel, indoor gatherings, and sharing food?all things that are more difficult during COVID-19. Unfortunately, despite a large amount of knowledge, making these difficult decisions is challenging and stressful.

**It is essential that you make informed decisions using the most up-to-date information. When people feel that they have made a good decision, they are better able to cope with the consequences, whatever they may be.** Thoughtful decisions help us to avoid getting stuck in regret or second-guessing. It enables us to move on and make the best out of whatever lies ahead.

Since these decisions and accompanying discussions can be very stressful and emotionally charged, we recommend:

- Break the decisions into smaller portions and keep discussions short, knowing that our tolerance for conflict may be lower given the stress we have been under.
- Gather information for each piece of the decision and try to share it with others prior to the discussion.
- Consider all possibilities and try to think creatively.
- List out the pros and cons.
- Discuss these issues with grace and patience knowing that whatever the decision, it may be difficult and have important implications.
- Create space to emotionally process information and decisions.

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## **Navigating difficult conversations with family**

Frustration, disappointment, and other strong emotions may come up when there are disagreements about whether or how to celebrate the holidays. COVID-19 brings a lot of uncertainty and unpredictability; you may have to make last-minute changes or cancel your plans, even those that are well thought out. Here are some suggestions for how to navigate difficult conversations with loved ones about holiday gatherings:

- **Plan ahead:** Many families gather at a particular relative's home or assume the role of host for a holiday dinner each year. Whatever the circumstances may be, it is important to start a conversation with your host or guests as soon as possible to let them know that the plans might be different this year. Share your concerns and ask about theirs. When you start the conversation earlier, you will be more likely to discuss your options and make decisions without the added stress of time pressure. If you worry about remembering everything you want to say, try writing down a few notes and keeping them nearby when you are on the phone or a video call.
- **Stick with the facts:** This is a time when feelings can be easily hurt. During these conversations, try not to lecture, get into a power struggle, or pass judgment. The goal is not to change someone else's mind (or for them to change yours). Share the facts that you are using to make your decisions using trusted sources, such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s holiday guidelines [9], travel guidelines [10], and guidance on understanding travel risk [11]. UCSF also has its own travel guidelines [12]. Stick to "I" statements (e.g., *"I would love to see you, but I want to make sure we all stay safe and healthy?"*) rather than questions or statements that can feel argumentative (e.g., *"Are you really willing to risk your health and ours?!"*).
- **Acknowledge your emotions (and theirs too):** Both the conversation and the ultimate decision might bring up some strong feelings for you. Rather than ignore or suppress the disappointment or hurt you are feeling, acknowledge it, and know that you are not alone. Chances are your loved ones are feeling the same way. There is value in recognizing those shared emotions and making sure the other person feels heard (*"I know you're really disappointed that we won't be together for Thanksgiving and I am too. It's been really hard to stay connected with each other during these last few months and I was looking forward to this. Please know how much I care about you."*). That being said, you are not responsible for how other people feel. It is okay to agree to disagree.
- **Offer alternatives:** You might not be able to celebrate in the way you are accustomed to; consider that this year might bring the opportunity to start a new ritual or tradition. Dropping off food and sharing a meal over video might be a compromise that everyone is willing to try. If emotions are running high after the first discussion of holiday planning, try waiting a few days and then offering compromises.
- **Accept what you cannot change:** Even the most thoughtful, sensitive conversations can lead to hurt feelings. You may not be able to compromise and that is okay, as long as you have made the decision that is right for you and consistent with your values. You cannot change the way other people feel or how they respond to the situation, but you can take charge of your own feelings and behaviors.

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## Loss

We have had many losses, both individually and collectively. They can range from death of family members to the loss of normal life experiences, like physical connection, school, sports, work, and social ritual engagements (such as graduations, birthdays, weddings, and funerals). Given the loss we all are experiencing, it will be normal to experience grief. This grief comes in many shades—unbearable sadness, fear, anger, despair, exhaustion, numbness or confusion—and changes with time. The holidays bring an additional layer to grief, in that we miss those who are alive or we have lost and experience all-too-familiar loneliness or isolation. The holidays are also a further reminder of financial struggles.

To help with grief and loss, consider these:

- Take extra time for self-care.
  - Reach out to others. Don't feel the need to be strong or feel ashamed.
  - Engage in activities that support creativity and meaning-making.
  - If you are getting stuck in guilt, ruminating, struggling to function, or are overwhelmed with despair, ask for help.
  - See our expert's advice on dealing with loss <sup>[13]</sup>.
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## Politics

We are likely to experience ongoing ambiguity and concerns about the social and political climate <sup>[14]</sup> over the holidays and, given all of our stress, compassion is key. News over the winter season is likely to remain controversial. Holiday gatherings at the best of times have the potential for conflict, and now decisions about travel and gatherings will often interface with political beliefs. Some suggestions include:

- If you need to share differing beliefs, try to talk only about your own feelings about things. Feelings cannot be disputed. Cite neutral sources like the CDC or World Health Organization (WHO).
  - Have a funny comeback at the ready to deflect questions that could take the conversation into difficult territory.
  - Know your triggers (people and places). Strategize to avoid them.
  - Be clear with others about your own boundaries. For example, *?I care about you, and I cannot talk about this anymore. I did want to ask you more about that Netflix show you were talking about...?*
  - Remember that racism and biases are a huge problem, not quickly fixed, and unlikely solved at a holiday gathering.
  - Try to reconnect around things you have in common.
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## Finances

Financial struggles are bound to affect millions of Americans as they head into the holidays. Unemployment rates have affected millions upon millions of households. Here are some tips:

- Before you consider spending a dime on travel or gifts, take an honest look at your

finances and set your priorities.

- Consider meaningful gifts that don't have significant costs that involve spending time together somewhere special (following safety guidelines of course): sharing a picture, favorite "quarantine recipes," or decorative cards with gratitude, quotes, or favorite poems.
- Don't apologize, it is not your fault. When in doubt, blame the virus. Rather, if you must say something, how about *"I wish I could do more."* Don't we all!
- Don't feel ashamed. Yes, we are struggling, but this is also an era where many are learning to be more compassionate and be aware of others' struggles.
- Large families or groups of friends might consider drawing a single name as part of a gift exchange rather than buying gifts for everyone.
- Focus on what the season is about for you and what is most critical for you to celebrate or find meaning.
- In general, focus on what you do have and what you can do.
- Finally, if you have more than you need, this is a wonderful time to share!

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## A time for gratitude and appreciation

Regardless of what you end up deciding to do regarding traveling, gathering, engaging in difficult conversations, and exchanging gifts, try to reconnect with whatever positive traditions, memories, or meaning the holidays may have for you. Simple and genuine expressions of gratitude can be very powerful. Even if it is simply the satisfaction of having gotten through a difficult season or having helped someone else to do so, try to let yourself step back from your day-to-day struggles and find a few moments of peace and joy in this time.

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**Source URL (modified on 11/18/2020 - 5:46pm):** <https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/copingresources/holidays>

## Links

- [1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/11/us/politics/coronavirus-surge-trump.html>
- [2] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/covid19#b>
- [3] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/covid19#a>
- [4] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/covid19#c>
- [5] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/seekinghelp#c>
- [6] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/covid19>
- [7] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/apps>
- [8] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/videos>
- [9] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>
- [10] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-during-covid19.html>
- [11] <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-risk.html>
- [12] <https://coronavirus.ucsf.edu/travel>
- [13] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/covid19#f>
- [14] <https://psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/election>