

A different December

Beautiful holiday displays of ornaments and gifts covered in plastic and just out of reach is a jarring and painful image that has quickly come to represent the complex and difficult reality of December 2020.

The holiday season can be a challenging one under ordinary circumstances. The increased demands on our time and wallet; patience with shopping lines, parking lots and extended family members – it all adds up.

This year, you're also navigating restrictions that have impacted daily life and will likely affect how you mark the holidays, all while working within a network of health professionals under more pressure than ever before. Surviving a season so layered with emotions and expectations when you may already be feeling near burnout will require intentional action.

Acknowledge all the feelings

Denying or avoiding emotions can be a subconscious strategy when we're in survival mode, but when uncomfortable feelings like disappointment, sadness, fear and grief surface, it's important to give them some space.

Simply naming the emotion and telling yourself that you're having an appropriate response to the circumstances is much more helpful than denying or pushing down your feelings.

For those who have experienced a recent loss, this will be especially important, as grief needs to be felt and acknowledged for healing to begin. The holidays can be a time when grief in particular is triggered; when it bubbles up, try to just let it move through you. It can be helpful to think about this as surfing the emotional waves – sometimes they're big, sometimes they're small – and like waves, the feelings will ebb and flow.



Be selective about where you spend your energy

Skeptics and conspiracy theorists have the luxury of being removed from the daily realities faced by those who work in health care and other essential services. For frontline workers, exposure to these perspectives is at best unsettling and at worst enraging.

Protect your mental health and emotional energy by filtering your social media follows, carefully choosing who you connect with personally, and asking your skeptical friends and relatives to avoid discussing those views with you.

Expect differences of opinion on how to celebrate

Within families and friendship groups, there will be varying levels of comfort with gathering, sharing a meal or exchanging gifts.

Communicate openly and honestly about what you're comfortable doing. Respect the opinions of others without campaigning for your position. When a compromise isn't possible, look for the things you agree about and focus on those activities, rather than putting energy into trying to change the other person's mind.

Hold onto rituals, with modifications if necessary

When life is full of chaos, rituals can be a grounding experience and a source of meaning in uncertainty. Take some time to think about your typical holiday rituals and how you might be intentional and creative about making those happen this year.

For example, if exchanging gifts is important but doing so at a group gathering isn't possible, consider dressing up to do a "Santa Drive" and dropping off treats or gifts on friends' and family's doorsteps.

Settle your system

Your "fight-or-flight" response was designed to protect you for a short period of time when under acute threat. The ongoing stress caused by the impacts of the pandemic means your stress response system is probably getting fatigued.

Use whatever time and energy you have available to focus on simple, basic acts of self-care that soothe and calm. Instead of trying to work up the energy to do something that feels like a chore, focus on the enjoyable things that you do feel motivated to do and do them as much as you can.

Enjoying food and alcohol is part of the holiday season and an important act of self-care and connects us to others when shared. If you find yourself over-using these and other indulgences, this can be an indicator that you need a few more tools in your self-care toolkit. An EAP counsellor can help you identify and develop a more diverse array of self-care strategies.

Lower the bar

A direct relationship exists between your expectations and level of satisfaction. Manage expectations of yourself and the situation by looking for the "least terrible" option instead of aiming for the best.

For example, if your ideal would be to have everyone together for dinner at your home, the "least terrible" option would be a scenario where you focus on the aspect that's most important to you – perhaps seeing a loved one on Christmas Eve – and finding a way to creatively make that happen. Instead of a big family dinner, maybe you order in and use an app like Houseparty to be together virtually.

This mental strategy is simple and effective because it shifts your target from the unattainable and disappointing to the realistic and possible. For those who have been impacted by job loss, the desire to give gifts might conflict with new financial realities or uncertainty. Adjusting expectations of self by making budget-conscious gift-giving plans is an important way to manage the stress of the holidays by not over-extending yourself and paying the price – literally and figuratively – later on.

This year's holiday season will most certainly look and feel different than any other. Acknowledging the way this feels for you and setting realistic expectations while focusing on your resilience will not only get you through December – it will set you up with the tools to continue to look after yourself in the coming year.

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