

Practice self-compassion

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 it makes sense to feel this way under the circumstances is dramatically different than denying or pushing down your feelings. Rather than judging or assigning value to emotions by thinking of them as "negative" or dismissing them with a thought like, "I shouldn't complain, others have it worse," try to approach your feelings with curiosity and validation.

When you wonder where the feeling comes from and acknowledge its importance, the emotion is given space – which allows you to process and defuse it.

Over time, these feelings demand less energy when you stop resisting and focus on accepting. For those who have experienced a recent loss, giving space 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

Time, money and energy are in high demand around the holidays and navigating the pandemic holiday experience adds another significant energy drain.

Be aware that none of these resources are bottomless, and healthy boundaries are more important than ever. You don't need to accept every social invitation; as those who are familiar with the recently named "Zoom fatigue" can attest to, even online gatherings take energy you might be running low on.

For those who have been impacted by job loss, the desire to give gifts might conflict with new financial limitations. Adjusting 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.

The holidays often mean we see people whom we otherwise don't connect with otherwise, and perhaps for good reason! 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 if you find them upsetting.

How can we cope during a layered holiday season?

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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, and exchanging gifts. As restrictions continue to evolve to align with the capacity of the healthcare system, families may find their desired plans at odds with public health orders – and this may lead to conflict between the more rule-abiding members and the non-conformists.

Communicate openly and honestly about what you're comfortable doing without campaigning. Trying to convince someone else to take your side or adopt your point of view can further entrench positions and lead to even greater contrast between perspectives.

Instead, respect the opinions of others without trying to change their mind and seek compromise where you can. When a compromise isn't possible, look for the things you do agree about and focus on those activities.

For example, if your family's plan to do the usual gathering, meal, and gift exchange doesn't fit for you, consider what aspect you might be comfortable participating in or how you can find a creative alternative. You might drop off or send gifts ahead of time and participate in a virtual unwrapping or find out what others plan to eat so you can make the same foods at home.

Hold onto rituals, with modifications if necessary

Routine is significant to our lives as it creates stability, predictability and makes us feel safe.

Rituals are life's sacred routines. Whether it's waffles every Saturday morning or the rites of Christmas mass, rituals are treasured activities that provide strength to the fabric of life.

Rituals create structure, a sense of belonging to a family, a community, and something bigger than ourselves. They're an important way we connect with others and mark significant moments. When life is full of chaos, rituals can be a grounding experience and a source of meaning in uncertainty.

Although some of your typical holiday rituals may not be possible this year, it's important to identify the ones that can be included, perhaps with a little creativity to make them work under unique and challenging circumstances.

In a holiday season full of disruption, it's natural to feel like it might be lacking in meaning. Be intentional and make it a priority to weave rituals into your pandemic holiday experience to make meaning in a difficult time.

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 presents on friends' and family's doorsteps.

Settle your system

Life has been significantly disrupted for most of us for about nine months. This level of disruption will trigger what's called the fight-or-flight response, an automatic and subconscious response to perceived threats to our safety.

This response was designed to protect you for a short period of time when under acute stress and was not intended for long-term use. The ongoing stress caused by the impacts of the pandemic means your stress response system is probably getting fatigued.

You can settle and recharge this system by focusing 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.

A simple slow breathing exercise will send signals to your brain that say, "Everything is okay. I'm safe." Examples can be found in the free app MyLife.

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.

The holidays tend to be a time thick with expectations of ourselves and our holiday experience. You can manage expectations of yourself and the situation by adjusting the bar to be more realistic and attainable.

Sometimes, in our desire for an ideal, we get fixated or stuck on the image of our perfect outcome. This tunnel vision leads to sure disappointment when our ideal isn't possible, and it prevents us from finding viable alternatives that are possible and a source of fulfillment.

Use a mental strategy that shifts your target from the unattainable and disappointing to the realistic and valuable 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 your loved ones 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 skill is simple and effective because it focuses on characteristics associated with resilience, like acceptance and creativity, rather than resistance and frustration.

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Resilience

Resilience is our ability to tolerate and bounce back from hardship. Resilient people are like new rubber bands with lots of flexibility, while those who have developed less resilience are more like an old rubber band – not so stretchy and prone to snapping.

Contrary to what you might believe, resilience isn't a characteristic we're born with – it's one we can learn and cultivate. During life's challenges, working at developing resilience is actually one of the best ways to become resilient – think of it like hands-on learning. Some simple tools that foster resilience are:

- **Practicing gratitude.** Making a daily habit of acknowledging things that you're grateful for is associated with resilience and improved mood. This can be done silently to yourself, through conversation with another person, or in a gratitude journal. The internet has a wealth of information on gratitude practices if you need some help getting started.
- **Imagining positive outcomes.** Pessimists often defend their position by saying they're being realistic. The reality is that it's within your power to choose the thoughts you focus on – and imagining good outcomes makes your mind a nicer place to be and makes you more resilient.
- **Expressing your feelings.** Journal, talk to someone you can confide in, have a good cry in the shower or simply acknowledge your uncomfortable emotions without minimizing. Whether feelings are expressed to another or simply to yourself, this action makes you more resilient by creating space for emotions rather than holding them in. When feelings are bottled up, they build up, gradually reducing our emotional capacity and flexibility.

Presence over presents

Emotional numbing is a subconscious coping strategy when we're exposed to a stressor for an extended period of time. It's important to know that emotional numbing isn't selective, meaning that we can't choose to numb negative emotions and not positive ones.

By numbing, we narrow our emotional range from the full scale to a small window where we neither feel the very low lows, nor the upper range of the highs, so people who have been numbing for a while will often report that they can't seem to feel very happy.

The antidote to numbing is presence. Strategies to increase our presence in the moment are often referred to as mindfulness and are most effective when practiced in their simplest form.

You can do this by taking a moment now to notice the feeling of your feet in your shoes, or the places your body is making contact with the chair you're sitting on. Taking a minute or two to take this exercise further by intentionally relaxing into the chair, noticing how it holds you up and allowing your body to be dependent on it, brings you into the present moment and sends calming signals to your brain. This is a portable tool that you can practice anywhere.

By aiming to be present this holiday season, you're more likely to experience pleasure and feel more rested too.

If you need a little extra support this holiday season, you can call the Employee Assistance Centre at Manitoba Blue Cross at 204.786.8880 or toll free 1.800.590.5553 or TTY 204.775.0586

Embody contentment

Whether it's money, time, emotional energy or toilet paper, the pandemic experience has instilled in many people a sense of scarcity, or not having enough of something.

The coming holiday season may represent one more drain on your resources, and if they're feeling in short supply already, the feeling of needing more or never having enough will be magnified.

The opposite of scarcity is abundance, but the antidote to perceived scarcity is gratitude, because it cultivates contentment. When we feel content, we appreciate what we have without denying difficulty, pain, or shortage.

Contentment doesn't happen when we suddenly have abundance – this has been proven by the many lottery winners who report that their winnings didn't make them happy. Contentment happens when we choose to shift our focus from wrestling with the feeling of not having enough to noticing what we do have and fostering gratitude for it.

Gratitude is best practiced simply by noticing and acknowledging silently or aloud the things that are easily hurried past or overlooked in the rush of life. An open parking spot when you're in a rush, having enough food in the house, a sunny morning, your favourite slippers, the feeling of a hot shower.

Practice an abundance of gratitude this holiday season and you'll find yourself rich with contentment.

Really recharge

When it comes to restoring your batteries in a meaningful way, we often operate under the false belief that we need to carve out large blocks of time to “relax” and “relax” is equated with doing nothing but enjoying peace and quiet.

There are a few problems with this approach. Hours and hours of “relaxation” are unrealistic for most under the best circumstances, because life is busy and quiet is hard to find. Layer on a pandemic, the holidays (with revisions), and family members constantly underfoot at home and it's probably impossible.

When the picture of recharging is this specific and out of reach, even contemplating a way to restore your tired self can be defeating. For many, meaningful recharging is better found by incorporating activities that adulthood doesn't often prioritize.

Play and rest, sources of joy and pleasure, and pursuing creativity all have major value to our sense of self, our mental health, and our internal battery bank. If you've been feeling drained lately, you might be better off pursuing an old hobby, spending half an hour playing a sport you love, engaging in fifteen minutes of playtime with your kids, or prioritizing valuable rest over an elusive goal of “relaxing” this holiday season.

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Authenticity

The holidays can carry an undercurrent of obligation for many – a palpable pressure to do, spend and give “enough.” The many feelings you’re likely to experience about and during this holiday season may complicate this further – for instance, by creating a desire to somehow “make up for” what the holidays can’t be this year.

Extra gifting, particularly if it comes at the cost of a responsible budget, is unlikely to make you or the recipient feel better about the challenges you’re facing. Similarly, it might seem like there’s no reason not to attend every online holiday get-together you’re invited to, but if “Zoom fatigue” is already wearing you down, you might take a pass, even if you could have attended in your sweats.

Consider what feels truly important and fitting for you this year, and then act in alignment with your values. If this means shifting away from some of the things you do every year, communicate this early and clearly to others who might be impacted.

For example, if your extended family does a Secret Santa gift exchange but you’re opting to focus on meaningful celebration with your spouse and child, let the family know that you’ll be skipping this year but would be happy to be included next year.

Celebrate

Take out a piece of paper (a sticky note works well for this exercise) and write down something that you achieved, celebrated, overcame, or enjoyed this year. Post it somewhere you’ll see it often. If you have more than one, write the additional items on separate pieces of paper and make a collage.

Keep adding to them and invite other members of your household to do the same. Name your collage – for example, Sarah’s Wall of Wonder. If you live alone, invite a friend to join you by sharing your notes with one another through photos or text. This could be a positive activity for a group in the workplace as well.

You’ll be amazed at the inspiration of seeing all the brilliant things that happened to you and those around you in 2020. The simple power of this exercise is in the act of celebrating in the midst of hardship.

No one can deny that this year has challenged us in ways we didn’t expect and probably felt unprepared for. Yet babies were born, graduations happened, stray pets found homes, sourdough recipes were mastered (or at least bravely attempted), seeds were planted, and humans did what humans do: we persevered. And that most certainly calls for celebrating.

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