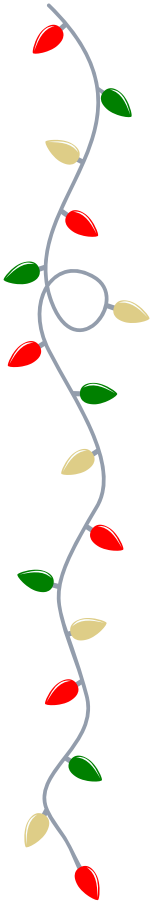




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Caring for your mental health during the holiday season



The holiday season can be a time of joy, togetherness, and cheer, with a new year to celebrate, and parties to attend. Yet many people find that there is also considerable stress, relationship tension, financial issues, and comparison culture that can weigh on mental health during this time of year.

The pressure to be "in holiday cheer" and seeing extended family and others we haven't seen for a while can prompt unwelcoming questions about our personal lives. Another concern that can come up during the holidays is feelings related to grief, loneliness, and sadness. Particularly if you've experienced a loss around the holidays, are going through your first holiday season after losing someone important in your life or have experienced a recent major life change prior to the holidays like divorce, a break-up, moving away from family and friends, or losing a job, the holidays can bring up complicated situations and emotions.

Here are some tips from our mental health team for how to care for yourself during the holiday season:

Take stock of your mental state:

- What emotions might need tending to right now?
- Deep inhale and full exhale (repeat 5 times)
- Acknowledge & find ways to soothe the five senses:
 - sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste
- Drink a cold glass of water





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Slow down and consider your needs:

It is easy to get carried away in the busyness of the season and forget about or stop doing the basic things that we need to do to look after ourselves. So, when you find yourself feeling frazzled by competing demands of social events, or the emotional toll the season overall takes on you, bring it back to basics and ask yourself these questions:

- When was the last time I ate something? Do I need a snack?
- When was the last time I moved my body? Would taking a walk or stretching for 10 minutes help?
- When is the last time I got fresh air or spent time outside? Can I go outside for 5 minutes and notice my surroundings, feel the air on my face, and listen to the sounds around me?
- Would it be possible to go to sleep 30 minutes early tonight so I can get some extra rest?
- Have I hydrated enough today? Maybe a glass of water or a cup of herbal tea would help.



Validate your own feelings and experiences:

- Affirming what you're going through during the holidays is important in a world that often holds many expectations around this time of the year. This can look like:
 - "This is a stressful time for me, and it's okay if I need to take time out for myself."
 - "I don't need to spend more than what I can afford on gifts this year."
 - "There's nothing wrong with spending the holiday season alone, I can still find ways to enjoy time with myself."





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Make space for things YOU love about the season, or start a new tradition:

It is easy to focus on what others might need from you during the holidays – and, if you're someone who enjoys giving your time, energy, gifts, etc. (which is a beautiful trait to have!), it can be easy to forget to pause and think about what you enjoy about the holidays.

- If it's challenging to find something you already enjoy about the season, you might consider what you wish had been a part of the holidays for you growing up or in past years and find ways to incorporate that this year.
- Consider ways that you can make your home space more beautiful / inviting during the season – put on some music that brings you joy and spend some time decorating your space to acknowledge the season. This can be done by yourself, or with friends – whatever is most meaningful to you.
- Buy a gift for yourself, perhaps something you have had your eye on for a while or have been saving for.
- Make a tradition of visiting a place that provides you comfort prior to or after any festivities can help you feel a sense of grounding and help you make space for any thoughts/feelings that come up. For many people, spending time near the ocean listening to the waves, or spending time sitting in nature and listening to the sounds of the birds can be particularly regulating.
- Consider inviting friends or family who aren't usually involved in your holiday season to do something new together – maybe you've always wanted to watch the fireworks being set off for New Years but haven't initiated a plan to do so, or maybe a game night and watching the fireworks on TV is more your style. Finding different ways to acknowledge the season with new people can help create new memories if the season does not always hold good memories from the past for you.
- If there is a food you really enjoy that you'd like to incorporate into your holiday season, consider setting aside a time to bake or cook it, pick some music to put on while you do so, and pair it with a movie you'd want to watch around this time every year – this is a lovely tradition that can be done by yourself or with others, and can morph and change based on your own tastes and what you enjoy.





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Find compassion for yourself and others:

- When you find yourself affected by what someone has said (perhaps it is a comment made in haste about your home situation around the holidays, a remark on your love life, or the assumption that you can afford to buy gifts when you have financial concerns), take a moment to pause.
- Sometimes people may say something without thinking it through first and that is not a reflection of who I am.
- During the holiday season, stress can be a shared experience with everyone experiencing it differently and may not recognise the impact they have on others.
- Helping someone who needs support can be a great way to show compassion to others and can have a positive effect on ourselves.

Make a plan for gatherings:

- Check in with yourself prior to the event to see how much energy you have to give:
- What am I noticing within my mind and body?
- How would I rate my level of energy and mood?

- Monitor your social battery throughout the event:
- Ask yourself: Am I finding it difficult to socialise and concentrate during conversations?
- Step away (i.e., going outside, different room) to take a breather



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Come up with an easy exit plan:

- Make a signal with the person you're leaving with that you're ready to go, and make sure they're going to honour that signal when you give it.
- Give yourself a timeframe for how long you can stay at an event.
- Set expectations ahead of time if you want to be able to leave without being pressured to stay (for example, letting the host know that you'll be able to stay for a couple of hours, but then have to be home to let your dog out).



Have "back pocket" answers to tough questions ready to go:

In social situations where you have not seen a friend, family member, or acquaintance in some time, there are sometimes unwanted questions and comments that are made about your love life, a delicate family situation, inquiring about when you're going to have a baby, commenting on your appearance, discussing a social or political issue in an unwelcome/uncomfortable manner or giving you unsolicited advice on your eating or drinking habits. It's important to have phrases ready to go to help defuse the conversation and move on to other topics. Here are a few options that you can put in your mental "back pocket" and pull out as needed:

- "I appreciate your concern about (*topic/issue*), but I am not up to talking about that right now. Let's discuss something else – have you watched any good movies lately? My favourite lately is...."
- "I'm personally not comfortable discussing this (*topic/issue*). I would appreciate it if we could talk about something else. Do you have any plans for the new year that you are looking forward to?"



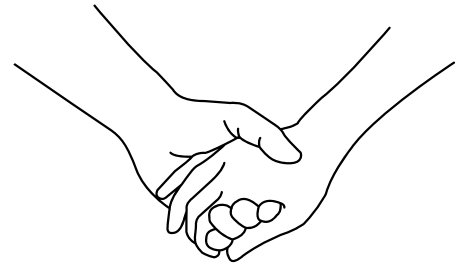


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Have options for defusing relationship conflicts:

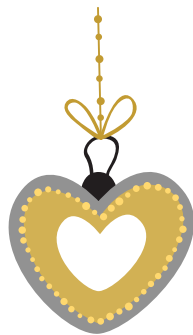
With increased stress and demands on time and heightened emotions due to the feelings the holidays bring up, relational conflicts can happen easily and often during this time of the year. It's important to know what will help defuse the conflict from escalating, so that you can revisit the issue during a time when there are less social, emotional, financial, and other demands you're facing. This can look like taking a break from the conversation, and getting some space for yourself. It can sound like saying,

"I don't want this to get more heated because I care about our relationship, so I'm going to go for a quick walk to cool down and come back in 5 minutes. I promise it doesn't mean that I don't think this is important to resolve, I just need a bit of a cooler head to be able to talk it through with you."



Don't go it alone, if possible:

Have a trusted person on call who you can vent to if a situation arises that causes you distress. Don't go to the work holiday event alone if you're feeling nervous – bring a friend or someone in your life who is a grounding, supportive presence if they're willing to join in.



And above all, remember: You know yourself and your needs best.

Tuning into yourself, asking yourself what you need, and finding ways to support yourself can be immensely helpful during stressful times of the year.

By looking after your mental health during the holiday season, you allow your heart and mind to be more open and present to experiencing some of the beauty, joy, and fun the season can bring in many different ways.