

The Holiday Season and Why It's Not Always the Best Time of the Year

by: Coretta Rego, MA, RP, CCC

The fall leaves have been raked up, the trick or treaters have come and gone and the countdown to the end of the year has begun. In the midst of all of this revelry, there will be many opportunities for gatherings with loved (or not so loved) ones. Diwali, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and Christmas are all celebrated closer to the end of the year. Even if one isn't religiously inclined, the end of the year tends to bring with it multiple occasions for celebration. Unfortunately, along with the food, drinks and presents, there also tends to be a large serving of stress.

There are different reasons why people find the holidays so stressful. It can be busy with every evening or weekend committed to a celebration of some kind. It can be expensive with the list of people to buy gifts for getting longer each year. It can also involve social interactions that can be uncomfortable or downright unpleasant.

In some cases, holiday stress can often turn into distress. As therapists, we are aware that holidays can be a difficult experience for people. Family estrangement, grief and financial pressure are some of the reasons why people struggle at what is often promoted as the most wonderful time of year.

So how do we support our clients, loved ones and ourselves to remain emotionally healthy during the holiday season? Unlike other life events that may happen less frequently and are therefore a little easier to grin and bear, the holidays are inescapable. It can be beneficial if we take some time in advance to think about what we anticipate the challenges of the season will bring, and come up with a coping plan. While the hope is to create a plan that can help us thrive, in some cases, simply surviving and making it out to the other side is also a valid goal.

Here are some suggestions to help you plan for the upcoming holiday season:

- When possible, try declining invitations to certain events. Regardless of how much fun an event is promoted as being (like an annual reunion with your high school friends) or how obligated you feel to attend (a family dinner), saying no to an event or two has multiple benefits. To start with, it gives you back some time in your schedule, spares you the expense of attending, as well as allows you to avoid any unpleasant social encounters. It also helps to build some comfort in saying no and not feeling guilty about it, which is an important life skill.



- If there is a social event that you must attend, recruit a buddy to go with you. Think about what your biggest concern is about attending this event. Is it the small talk with colleagues you only see once a year? Turn to the person in your social circle who is skilled at banter. Is it seeing a family member who often berates you? Take a loved

one who can calmly but firmly put an end to the conversation. If necessary, make an appearance and have a signal in case an early exit is required. The benefit here is twofold: you get credit for attending, while also allowing you to avoid some of the more challenging aspects of the social gathering.

- If you feel that hosting a social gathering is an important though stressful element of the season, consider choosing an alternate venue. For example, in lieu of a potentially tense dinner with the entire extended family in your home, consider inviting family members to a public event in the community a few days before or after the holiday season (for example, ice skating at the local rink). This is an opportunity for the family to be together while removing some of the one on one interaction that is often the source of conflict and stress. It also gives an objective goal to focus upon...
- If the holiday season is difficult due to grief, give yourself permission to not celebrate if you don't feel capable, or to celebrate on a smaller scale. Carve out time and space to grieve. If possible, do something specific that addresses your loss so that it doesn't feel minimized in the midst of the celebration occurring around you.
- If the holiday season fills you with dread to the point that it is interfering with your well-being, consider speaking to a therapist. A therapist can work with you to not only address the source of the struggle, but also to come with strategies for how to manage it. Holidays can have a negative impact on mental health and well-being regardless of how well one has been throughout the year. Seeking the appropriate professional support can be very beneficial.

For some people, the holiday season is truly the most wonderful time of the year. For others, there is less joy and more strain. Regardless of how you feel about the season, remember to take care of yourself, as that is the best gift you can give yourself and others.

Coretta Rego is a Toronto-area registered psychotherapist. Published with permission, this article originally appeared on the Counselling Connect blog of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA). CCPA is a national bilingual association providing professional counsellors and psychotherapists with access to exclusive educational programs, certification, professional development and direct contact with professional peers and specialty groups. CCPA promotes the profession and its contribution to the mental health and well-being of all Canadians. The Nova Scotia School Counsellors Association, a professional association of the NSTU, is a reciprocal associate member of CCPA. For further information on CCPA visit: <https://www.ccpa-accp.ca/>

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