

WELLNESS TIPS

COPING WITH HOLIDAY STRESS DURING COVID-19

While there is often much to look forward to with the holidays, they can also involve some level of stress. Because of the impact of Covid-19 or other occurrences, this year may be more stressful than typical for many people.

This week's Tips reviews steps you can take to prepare for and cope with holiday stress with the pandemic in mind, many of these steps also apply to moderating stress you may experience associated with holiday celebrations.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS

It is normal to experience feelings of sadness and grief that the pandemic has disrupted traditions you anticipated and looked forward to but will not happen. You may be experiencing feelings of loss because "normal" doesn't exist right now.

It is also normal to experience a range of emotions. Along with sadness, for example, there might be a sense of relief associated with decreased demands or expectations placed on you.

Last week Tips discussed journaling and this might be useful in recognizing and working through your feelings.

BE REALISTIC

Even if past gatherings and celebrations have been enjoyable and exciting, they probably weren't the same each year as families or circumstances change. And there may be difficulties that you might not miss, such as crowds at the airport, driving for hours in extremely cold weather, or spending time with an overbearing or annoying relative. The goal isn't to minimize feelings of sadness and disappointment but idealizing past events and picturing the current situation as worse than it is doesn't help either. Remind yourself the pandemic won't last forever.

This is the time of year when we frequently hear the words "grateful and gratitude". Practicing gratitude, for both large and small things in your life will help you keep things in perspective. (See Gratitude Tips on MSCC site).

PLAN AHEAD

Planning is important as Covid-19 risk factors are considered. If you plan to travel, how will you manage stress as you maintain safety? How will you manage risk factors in the environment where you will be staying? What response do you anticipate from others when you share your plans and how can you respond if they are disappointed, sad, or angry?

If you decide not to travel, plan for how you will spend your time

SET BOUNDARIES WHEN NECESSARY

Identify what your needs and best interests are. You might need to say “no” if asked to do something that goes against your best interests. I have talked with students who have made difficult decisions to not visit because family members have not followed Covid-19 recommendations for masking, social distancing, and limiting contact with others. There may be expectations not related to Covid which you find stressful and would like to change by setting new boundaries. Think about your needs and interests, what would be acceptable to you and what limits you would like to set.

If others disagree with a decision you have made and try to convince you otherwise, stick to the topic when discussing your decision and don’t get side-tracked or caught up in other issues. Don’t become defensive and repeatedly justify your decision. At some point, it’s OK to end the discussion.

Acknowledge others’ feelings (such as disappointment, sadness, anger) while also expressing your feelings, but don’t take on responsibility for fixing their feelings.

If your decision is pandemic-related, point out that this is a one-time situation, it will end, and that you anticipate being able to resume traditional activities in the future (if you would like to).

If you are staying with family, feel free to take breaks if you find yourself becoming stressed. Take a walk around the block. Run an errand for a forgotten item at the grocery store and take the long route!

CONSIDER ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES

If you traditionally have a large extended family gathering that won’t occur this year, would a Zoom gathering work? It could include a variety of activities, such as an intergenerational game (Pictionary?), having children share a talent, magic trick or joke, and rotating breakout rooms so that smaller groups can catch up and chat. Would you like to give each other “tours” of decorations you have put up?

Is there a project or activity you would like to learn or work on? Perhaps you would like to cook a special meal and watch a movie. Are there people you can connect with, either safely in person or virtually? Volunteering can be satisfying for you and benefit the recipients.

MAINTAIN HEALTHY HABITS

It’s easier to cope with stress when you are maintaining a consistent eating and sleeping schedule. Engaging in physical activity or exercise can work off physical tension. Spending time outdoors can be energizing. Consume alcohol in moderation.

The holidays often include some stress in “normal” years when things are going well. 2020 has been the poster year for change and stress, and this continues as the holiday season and semester break approach. Developing a plan for managing stress can be helpful in navigating the coming several weeks.

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Mayo Clinic. Healthy Lifestyle. “Stress, Depression and the Holidays: Tips for Coping.” Mayo Clinic Staff.

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Mental Health America. “Preparing for the Holiday During Covid-19.” 2020.

<https://mhanational.org/preparing-holidays-during-covid-19>

Psychology Today. “Peaceful Holidays Start with a Plan. How to Keep Your Cool When Family Pushes Your Buttons.” Christine Korol. November 1, 2020.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/still-mind/202011/peaceful-holidays-start-plan>

See the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips. <https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Stay Safe and Stay Well.

Contact the MSCC with questions or concerns or to schedule an appointment with any of our counselors.

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