

Coping with Holiday Stress

Pumpkins have been carved, apples have been picked, candy has been eaten, and the holiday season has officially commenced. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, New Year's Eve, and all of the holidays that come around this time of year typically bring joy and excitement. However, they also can bring stress and anxiety for many people.

According to a survey by the American Psychological Association (APA), 38% of people say their stress level increases during the holidays. Marybeth Evans, a licensed clinical social worker at OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois, discusses why this is, and how to navigate holiday stress.

"I think there is a lot of pressure on families – kind of a cultural pressure – to have great holidays and high expectations, and I think that's overblown. Simplify the holidays so that everybody can actually enjoy the company of one another and not worry about the menu or the gifts. And maybe if you really do want to do those things, still find a way to simplify it," says Evans.

From spending money on gifts to juggling family gatherings and everything in between, Evans recommends sitting down and taking a look at what you find special or important about the holidays and focusing on those things – and managing your expectations of the holiday season early on can help reduce stress levels by keeping things in perspective, remembering what's important, and taking time for yourself.

For many, the COVID-19 pandemic is adding to the typical holiday stressors as people navigate how to approach this particular holiday season. Should we gather as an immediate family or with extended family as well? Will the people I plan to gather with be fully vaccinated? What if family members choose to opt out of gatherings this year? Where do I start with this year's holiday plans?

"Discuss it far enough ahead of time so that you aren't caught off guard. For example, if your mom usually has Thanksgiving dinner and she doesn't feel up to it this year, you can approach her and ask what she is thinking and perhaps she is hoping someone else will step up this year or may just want to gather with immediate family," Evans advises.

If you have a family member who chooses to forego the full-fledged family gathering this year, Evans recommends spending time with them on other days throughout the holiday season by having a meal with them, watching a holiday movie, or doing some other meaningful activity. Additionally, sending greeting cards to your loved ones during this time of year is a wonderful way to let them know you are thinking of them during this time of year.

In addition to the stress and anxiety many people feel during the holidays, some people who suffer from [seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#) may experience a heightened level of negative emotions as they try to navigate their seasonal depression while also trying to enjoy the holidays.

"A lot of people suffer from SAD, and I think symptoms for people who have depression are more difficult in the winter time. It's harder to get up in the morning, it's harder to feel good when there is no sunshine. The holidays come at a time of year that is difficult anyway. You're trudging through the snow, your car might not start. There are a lot of things to frustrate you during the winter that can also interfere with enjoying the holidays," explains Evans.

Evans recommends checking in on your loved ones and including them in holiday plans even if they choose not to attend – and to not pressure or guilt your family or friends into participating in activities if they are not up to it. And if you are one of the many Americans who suffers from SAD, or who is experiencing heightened stress and anxiety levels surrounding this holiday season, make sure to sit back, take time for yourself, and experience the holidays how you want to.

"I think there are always things to be grateful for – even in sad or stressful times. So if the best thing you can be grateful for is that you still can get together with your family or that you have a roof over your head, then that's something to be grateful for," Evans says.

For those who may find they need extra support this holiday season, [OSF SilverCloud](#) is a secure, anonymous and interactive online platform to help manage the feelings and causes of depression, anxiety, or stress.