

MANAGING THE CHALLENGES OF CORONAVIRUS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

Cigna Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

As the pandemic continues to reshape our lives, the holiday season will likely look somewhat different. Traditions and norms may be upended. Loved ones we enjoy celebrating with may not be able to attend this year. Travel and close gatherings may be impacted. Along with the standard stressors of the season, many of us may be feeling deeper, more challenging emotions, such as grief, worry, or anxiety. Review the tips below for strategies on managing difficult emotions during the holidays this year:

Coping with change and uncertainty:

Holidays are built on traditions, many of which may be upended this year. We may experience a sense of loss – loss of normalcy, social connections, and more. When plans and expectations aren't what we're used to, it can bring up feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

- › **Allow your feelings.** Dealing with change or loss of this nature brings with it a grieving process. Coping with a change in our expectations or visions for the future can make you feel unsteady. This is normal. Acknowledge the feelings and remind yourself of how you've coped with other difficult situations during the pandemic thus far.
- › **Adjust your expectations.** A re-creation of past holiday gatherings may not be possible this year. Zero in on what will be most meaningful to you and your family, rather than things you felt obligated to do in the past. Be open to the idea of creating new memories and traditions. This year of all years, try to let go of perfection. Remind yourself the disruptions won't be for forever.
- › **Plan ahead.** Refer to recommendations from the CDC and local public health officials when determining what type of gathering you are comfortable hosting or attending. If you're traveling, consider how you will travel and where you will stay. If you are hosting, determine how many people you are comfortable with inviting, how food will be served, and expectations surrounding distancing or conduct.
- › **Think "flexibility."** The holidays are notorious for "curveballs" even in normal times. Prepare for plans to change abruptly. Attendees may need to cancel due to illness or safety concerns. You may need to shift plans to accommodate your own or others' challenges. Expect the unexpected this year.

- › **Find creative ways to preserve meaning and tradition.** If food is an important part of your holiday traditions, consider socially distanced food exchanges with family members or neighbors. If a gathering is virtual, consider having a shared activity for those who attend. Examples include enjoying a meal together, having a fun theme, games, or even religious or spiritual events.
- › **Break down big challenges into smaller, "bite-size" goals you can tackle.** If you're hosting a virtual event this year, a small goal might be familiarizing yourself with the virtual platform. Take one issue at a time, writing out what is required and how you might meet the challenge.
- › **Take a time-out from worry or obligation.** Recognize when you are starting to feel stressed or anxious, and have a plan to help you relax and step away for a moment. Take a breath, or a quiet cup of tea. Find something soothing to help you recharge and nurture yourself.

Navigating tension:

Tension and conflict can be present during the holidays during the best of times. This year, differing approaches to safety measures can add to strained relationships.

- › **It's okay to set limits about who you see and when.** Check current recommendations from the CDC or local public health officials. Set boundaries you feel comfortable with to keep you and your family safe and healthy.
- › **Give advanced notice so visitors can adapt.** Be open and honest. Spell out your expectations around pandemic precautions, such as face coverings or required distancing at in-person events.



- › **Avoid judgment.** If you will not attend a gathering, use “I” statements to explain why: “I feel it’s important for us to avoid travel this year, so we won’t be able to attend Thanksgiving this year.” Do not express judgment over how others are handling the situation. If you are hosting, be respectful of others’ choices on whether or not to attend, even if you disagree.
- › **Keep the focus on your feelings and comfort level.** Do not let the conversation descend into a debate or argument on the seriousness of the virus or other “charged” subjects.
- › **Allow others to feel heard.** Feelings may be hurt about changed plans, both from extended family or friends and in your own family. Acknowledge those feelings, and share your own sadness and disappointment. Suggest alternative ways to celebrate, such as a virtual gathering.
- › **Look for stories of inspiration to inspire hope.** It may feel more challenging to see the positives this year. Look to your family, friends, and your community for examples of resilience: ways to come together through challenges, local volunteer or charity work, or stories of hope and kindness.
- › **Reach out to others for help and support.** Talk out your thoughts, challenges, and fears with others, such as friends or close family members. Think about who could be helpful as a giver of perspective, as a problem-solver, or simply as a sympathetic listener. You might consider enlisting the help of a professional counselor through your EAP to talk through difficult feelings surrounding the pandemic and/or the holidays.

Managing difficult emotions:

This time may cause complex emotions: discouragement, feeling “flat,” a deflated spirit, even depression. If you’ve lost a family member, grief or sadness may surge during this time. It is important to prioritize your emotional wellness to cope.

- › **Take care of yourself.** Adequate sleep helps your body renew its resources. Exercise can provide a boost of endorphins and other chemicals that improve our mood. Eating well-balanced, regular meals ensures you have the energy to cope with new challenges. These routines can be pushed aside during the hustle and bustle of the holidays, but they are important to combat difficult emotions.
- › **Offer support/assistance to others.** Reaching out and helping others helps change your emotional focus. You can feel part of the solution rather than just a victim of circumstance. Reach out to a neighbor who you know is alone during the holidays, or drop off a meal or holiday treat to someone who is having a tough time.
- › **If you’re alone for the holiday, plan activities that you enjoy.** Watch favorite holiday movies or an old TV series. Make a phone date with a friend or family member. Indulge in your favorite foods.
- › **See if you can find the “silver linings” to the changes this year.** Perhaps less pressure to put on the “perfect holiday.” Or having more time for activities you enjoy with fewer obligations. Focusing on small bits of positivity can help keep negativity from overwhelming you.

Supporting children

Changes to holiday traditions can be hard for children. What can you do to support them?

- › **Explain holiday plans and what will be different this year.** Give plenty of warning of the changes. Be prepared with an answer for the “Why?” questions.
- › **Set expectations for gatherings if you see others in person.** Explain the “rules” surrounding hugging, maintaining distance, and other behaviors.
- › **Address concerns or feelings.** Expect disappointment, sadness, or even anger when children can’t attend an event or see a loved one. Be honest about your own feelings, but keep your own stress in check.
- › **Engage children in holiday planning and preparations.** Let them help you decorate, bake cookies, and other activities.
- › **Focus on positive, meaningful connections.** Help them see what they can look forward to with this year’s festivities. Plan a fun virtual activity they can engage in with loved ones, like opening gifts or eating a meal “together.”
- › **Remember, kids are resilient!** They can get through this – and so can you.

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