



# Coping with the Holidays



The ADAMHS Board of Cuyahoga County and the Suicide Prevention Coalition offer this brochure to provide information and strategies to help get you through the holiday season.



# Happy Holidays?

Sometimes the holidays aren't always happy. There is an expectation to have the perfect holiday for ourselves and our family and friends. This often unrealistic goal is reflected in movies, television, books, stories of holidays past and our own internal thoughts.

The ADAMHS Board and the Suicide Prevention Coalition collaborated to highlight topics of special concern for mental health wellness during the holidays.

Topics include:

- Stress and the holidays
- Taking charge
- Self-care
- Grieving during the holidays
- Dealing with loss/change over the holidays
- Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)
- Ways to help seniors have a happy holiday
- Inexpensive ways to celebrate the holidays
- Resources



We hope this guide will help you be less stressed and more resilient during the holidays.



# Stress and the Holidays

The holiday season is ideally the happiest time of the year. However, it is often one of the most difficult because it is a time of “too much” - doing too much, eating too much, drinking too much and spending too much. Below are some useful tips for reducing stress during the holidays.

## Tips for Overcoming Holiday Stress

1. Have reasonable holiday expectations. What happens in holiday movies is not reality.
2. Avoid toxic people whenever possible. Every invitation doesn't have to be accepted.
3. Practice your breathing, deep breaths can help reduce stress and tension.
4. Prioritize your preparations. As pressures mount, relax and concentrate on what is most important. The food being perfect isn't as important as the people gathered around the table to eat it.
5. Get enough sleep. The National Sleep Foundation recommends adults (ages 18-64) get seven to nine hours of sleep each night.
6. Enjoy free holiday activities, such as holiday light displays or visiting with friends.
7. Spend time with people who are supportive and care about you. Reconnect with someone you have lost touch with.
8. Don't drink too much alcohol. Excessive drinking can increase depressive symptoms.
9. Don't be afraid to try something new. Celebrate the holidays in a way you haven't done before.



# Taking Charge

Taking charge of your life will help you reduce stress. For some people, being assertive is very hard. However, not being assertive during the holidays and trying to please everyone, often brings financial problems, depression, and physical illness.

## 10 Ways to Take Charge During the Holidays



1. Know your needs and ask people to help you meet them.
2. Don't put higher expectations on yourself than you put on others.
3. Have a plan of action to help you enjoy the holidays. (Who, What, When and How)
4. Think positively about yourself, family, friends and your situation.
5. Take advantage of free activities like concerts and light displays.
6. Try not to compare yourself to others.
7. Plan ahead and give yourself plenty of time to coordinate activities.
8. Count your blessings - see the cup as half full rather than half empty.
9. People are more important than possessions. Learn to live more with less.
10. Pat yourself on the back for getting through another holiday.

Family dynamics can be difficult  
- spend time with people that fill  
you with positivity.



# Self-care

For many, the holiday season means planning and taking care of others. However, this leaves little time for taking care of oneself. Below are a few ideas on how to practice self-care during this holiday season.

**Regularly schedule time to engage in self-care activities.** Schedule daily self-care activities like exercise, meditation or a hobby you enjoy.

**Practice gratitude for the people and events in your life.** This might include writing in a journal about what you appreciate in your life or letting others know the gratitude you feel.

**Tune into the emotions you are experiencing.** Emotions may be positive, negative or a combination of the two. Call “time outs” for yourself and check in on your feelings. Write down your feelings in a journal.

**Try to understand why you might be experiencing negative emotions.** For some people, negative emotions might be related to unrealistic expectations or goals of themselves around the holidays or from feeling overwhelmed. Readjust goals so they are specific and attainable.

**Monitor your stress level.** Write down your stress level in a journal at various times during the day. Take note of the situation you are in when feeling stressed. Is it around certain people? Or engaging in specific activities? Have a list of activities you can engage in to relax for a few minutes. Perhaps this is taking a walk, doing a few minutes of yoga, watching a favorite movie or playing with a pet.

**Being present around the presents.** Practice mindfulness and meditation. This can include spending a minute or two being present in your environment. Take notice of the smells, sounds and sights of the holidays. Notice the differences between the holiday season and other times of the year. Mindfulness techniques can be more than quiet contemplation.

**Take care of your physical health.** Ensure adequate sleep and a nutritious diet. Develop a plan to enjoy the special foods and treats around the holidays while balancing them with healthy eating.

Adapted from Harvard University (2017)



# Grieving During the Holidays

Coping with loss during the holidays can be extremely difficult no matter how recent your loss is. Remember, it's not about getting over, it is about getting through.

**Love does not end with death.** Since love does not end with death, holidays may result in a renewed sense of personal grief - a feeling of loss unlike that experienced in the routine of daily living. Sounds, sights and smells of the holidays may trigger memories of the one you love who has died.

**Talk about your grief.** During the holiday season, don't be afraid to express your feelings of grief. Ignoring your grief won't make the pain go away and talking about it openly makes you feel better. Spend as much time as possible with friends and relatives who care and will listen without passing judgement. They can help you to feel understood and not as isolated.

**Be tolerant of your physical or psychological limits.** Feelings of loss can leave you fatigued. The emotional stress may be exhausting, and your low energy may naturally slow you down. Listen to what your body and mind are telling you. Take care of yourself – physically and emotionally.

**Talk about the person who has died.** Include your loved one's name in your conversations during the holidays. If you are able to talk openly, other people may recognize your need to remember your loved one who has died and be able to talk about them.

**Do what feels right for you during the holidays.** Well-meaning family and friends often try to prescribe what is good for you during the holidays. Instead of going along with their plans, focus on what you want to do. Discuss your wishes with a caring, trusted friend. Talking about those wishes may help you clarify what it is you need and want to do during the holidays.

**Plan ahead for family gatherings.** Structure your holiday time. This will help you to anticipate activities rather than just reacting to whatever happens. Getting caught off guard may create feelings of panic, fear and anxiety during a time when your feelings of grief are already heightened. As you make your plans, leave room to change them if you feel the need.

# Dealing with a Loss or Change

The holidays can be painful for those who have lost a loved one or have gone through divorce, especially children. Coping with separation and loss is magnified during the holidays. People may feel pressured to celebrate the holidays while their world seems to be falling apart.

## How to help someone deal with a loss

1. Allow them to talk about their feelings and memories, and try to get them involved in new activities.
2. Change your traditional pattern in some way - have the family dinner at a different place or open gifts at a different time. Create new rituals and family traditions.
3. Don't let a person spend too much time alone. If a person becomes depressed, help is available on the crisis hotline 24-hours a day. **Call: 216-623-6888.**
4. Remember, many people think of their pets as part of the family, and their loss can be just as painful.

## Surviving Divorce



1. After divorce, be sure to let children know that the holidays will continue, but in a different way. Decide ahead of time how the holidays will be divided, and include children in the planning.
2. Make sure you and your children have realistic expectations. Never put children in the middle of disagreements or ask them to choose sides.
3. Try to get plenty of rest, exercise and eat healthy so you will be better able to cope. Remember, tired children are more easily stressed and likely to be moody.
4. Plan fun activities. If memories are too painful, consider a vacation or a visit to out-of-state relatives.
5. Take one day at a time. Rely on support from friends and family, and realize that it will get easier with time.

# Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

SAD, also known as the winter blues, is a type of depression that comes and goes with the four seasons. It typically manifests during the cold autumn and winter months when the days are shorter, darker and chillier.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the main risk factors for SAD are age, sex, distance from the equator (since regions farther to the north and south tend to have shorter days and less sunlight in winter) and a history of depression or other mood disorders. Some tips that may alleviate SAD symptoms include:

**Light Therapy.** There are many devices available that simulate natural light. You should consult with your health care provider before trying any new therapies. According to the Cleveland Clinic, about 70 percent of people with SAD see improvement when exposed to a therapy light for about a half hour each day.

**Stay Active.** A daily walk in the middle of the day could be as helpful as light therapy for coping with the winter blues.

**Create Social Situations.** During the winter, the cold and lack of regular social interaction can lead you to feel down. Try to push yourself to be more social and to connect with others. Often, once you make the effort, the social interaction can lift your spirits.





# Ways to Help Seniors have Happy Holidays



The holiday season is a happy and joyous time for most, but many older adults and seniors find the season hectic, confusing and even depressing depending on their mental, physical and emotional condition. Help contribute to a happier season for the older adults and seniors in your life by doing the following:

1. **Explore old memories.** Older adults and seniors love to share happy, humorous and light-hearted memories. It can also be a wonderful way for them to interact with the “younger crowd.”
2. **Plan.** Anticipate the fact that the elders in your family may need a break from all the commotion and loud noise. Keep an eye on them, and escort them to a quiet room where they can relax for a little while.
3. **De-clutter.** Remove unnecessary clutter items that are a tripping hazard.
4. **Be thoughtful.** Many older adults experience memory loss, so keep this in mind when you’re telling stories or rehashing events from the past.
5. **Spend quality time with the elders in your life.** There is a lot to learn from them. They will appreciate the time you spend with them.
6. **Include everyone.** Seniors like to feel useful and needed. Even elders with physical limitations can be given a simple task to help out with meal preparation, such as greasing a cooking pan, peeling vegetables or placing napkins on the table.
7. **Extend invitations.** If you know seniors or older adults who are alone, invite them over for a meal.
8. **Fight the downside.** Depression has a way of sneaking up on you. If you or an elderly loved one have symptoms of depression for two weeks, talk to your doctor.
9. **Help elders in your life by monitoring their medication intake and alcohol consumption.** During the hectic holiday season, it can be easy for seniors to forget to take their medications or drink a little too much.

# Inexpensive Ways to Celebrate the Holidays

Some of the best ways to create memories are inexpensive. The "little" moments and gifts are often the most remembered.



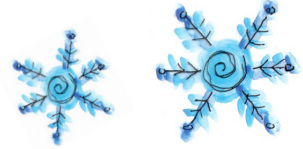
## Unique Holiday Gifts/Activities

1. Provide for time with family members and other loved ones. Read stories or poetry together, share fondest holiday memories or bake cookies.
2. Share family history with your children and/or grandchildren or put together an album of old photos. Photo albums make great gifts and are a good way to pass on family customs and traditions.
3. Record children singing to grandparents and have grandparents record stories of the good old days for the family to share.
4. Have each family members decorate a paper bag. Then, each person writes on a piece of paper something he/she appreciates about each member of the family and one gift (that can't be bought) that he/she will give each member. For example, a child might write, "Dad, I really appreciate the fact that you take time to help me with the computer. My gift to you will be at least 15 minutes to relax when you get home." Then, everyone puts the notes in each others bags.
5. Share some of your favorite recipes; write them on pretty cards and give them as gifts. Have a cookie exchange with your friends and neighbors.
6. Give a family heirloom as a gift to someone who will treasure it. Make sure you are ready to part ways with it first.

# Best Wishes

You can make this season's celebration a beautiful, fulfilling experience for yourself and those close to you. Once you know what to guard against and how to handle matters in a new way, you and your family will be better able to enjoy the holiday season.

The successful mindset for a happy holiday season requires flexibility and a willingness to break out of old patterns to find new, more satisfying ones. Combined with a little planning and self-care you will be on your way.



## Resources

If you or someone you know is in crisis or if the stress of the holiday season becomes too much, please seek help. You can get help from any of the following:

**ADAMHS Board of Cuyahoga County's 24-Hour Mental Health/ Addiction Crisis Information & Referral Hotline:** call (216) 623-6888

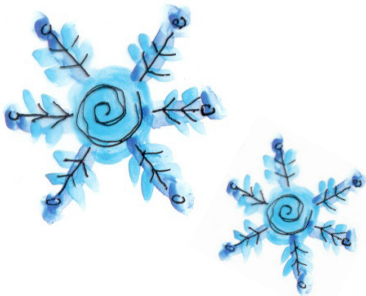
**United Way's First Call for Help:** dial 211

**Crisis Text Line:** text "4Hope" to 741741

**24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** call 1-800-273-8255

**Warm Line:** call 440-886-5950, 9:00 am - 1:00 am including holidays  
Need a listening ear? Call the Warm Line, and a peer-supporter will listen and talk you through a hard holiday season.

The **Cuyahoga County Suicide Prevention Coalition** is composed of organizations, community members and survivors dedicated to instilling hope, raising awareness, providing education and promoting resources in an effort to reduce the incidence of suicide and suicidal behavior in Cuyahoga County. The Coalition is chaired by Linda Torbert, Director of Prevention & Children's Behavioral Health Programs. If you would like to join the Coalition, please contact co-chair Tonya Birney, Behavioral Health Prevention Specialist, at [birney@adamhsc.org](mailto:birney@adamhsc.org).



**Coping with the Holidays is a community resource guide developed by the ADAMHS Board and the Suicide Prevention Coalition.** This guide is intended to offer helpful tips that may reduce stress during the holidays. Its suggestions are not intended to be all inclusive.

If you would like copies of Coping with the Holidays, please contact Beth Zietlow-DeJesus, Director of External Affairs, at [dejesus@adamhsc.org](mailto:dejesus@adamhsc.org).



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