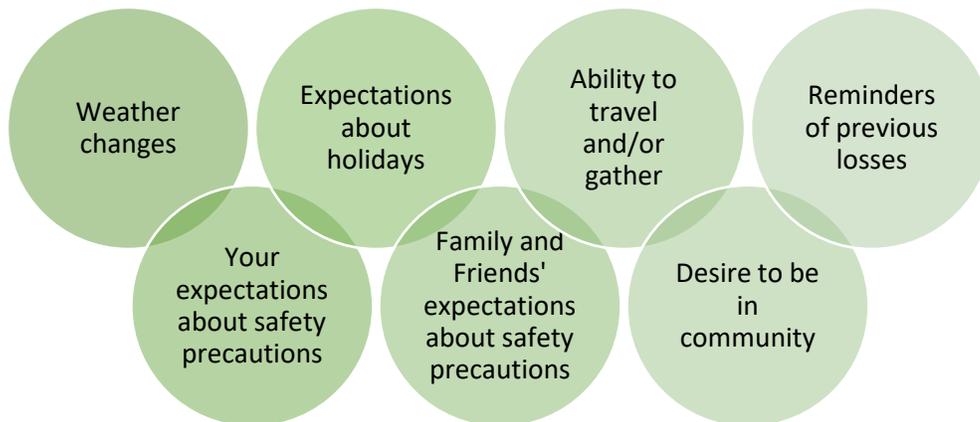


Moving into the Holidays

It is safe to say that many of us never thought that eight months later we would still be living through a pandemic. As the days get shorter and colder, we are reminded of the upcoming winter holidays and the need once again to find new ways to mark yet another season impacted by COVID. However, with some intentional planning we have an opportunity to shape how this holiday season will look.

As the weather changes, the reduced availability of sunlight may impact your mood. Waking up at your normal time may be more difficult, or perhaps it is disheartening that darkness comes before your workday ends. Our mood impacts how we perceive and engage with the world; and can impact our motivation and ability to plan.

The winter holiday season always comes with a set of expectations and anticipation. This year, there may be anxiety or ambiguity about how we will be doing and how we will be engaging (or not) with others. This increase in uncertainty is layered with the anxiety and ambiguity that may be a part of your daily existence. This year the holidays will most likely look different than in years past. Travel, family gatherings, religious services, and long held traditions are all impacted by the Pandemic. Your comfort level and expectations for social interactions may look very different from family members or friends, which can cause tension and anxiety.



With some intentional planning and communication, the 2020 winter holidays can still bring opportunities to connect and reflect with those we care about. Even though it may be harder to connect in person with others, it is still important to stay connected. Our support systems play a vital role in helping us through managing pandemic stress and grief. It is also important to identify tools and strategies you can use to manage big emotions during this time. Being proactive and creating a coping plan in advance, allows you to take some of the guess work of trying to identify what you need in the moment, while you're also trying to manage whatever it is that you are struggling with. So how do you navigate these winter holidays?

Communicate

Our brains make assumptions when we don't have access to facts which can amplify uncomfortable feelings. Taking the time to figure out what you are feeling and expecting and then engaging in a conversation with family and friends can help reduce worry and anxiety and even increase compassion and connection.

Reflect

- Take a moment and reflect on how you want the holidays to look and feel.
- Your priorities may be very different this year than in prior years.
- Assess your expectations. Are they realistic? Are they compassionate to self and others?

Identify uncomfortable feelings

- It is okay to have big emotions related to the changes this year. Share these with your (chosen) family.
- Seek support from those who care about you, and spend time grieving what you miss together.

Have a clear conversation

- Have a conversation with your (chosen) family about the upcoming holiday season. Consider having multiple small/intimate conversations.
- Name that this year will be different and discuss what traditions you want to engage in this year and which ones get put on hold for the year.
- Clearly share your comfort level regarding in-person gatherings, and communicate expectations for safety protocols with family and friends.

Plan Ahead

Having an intentional plan is important during these uncertain times. Don't wait for things to feel overwhelming to identify what and who you can turn to for support.

Remember the basics!

It is important to take care of your physical health by eating healthy meals, regularly exercising, getting enough sleep, and keeping up with routine medical appointments.

Create new traditions.

Find novel ways to still feel connected to loved ones during the winter holidays. If it is not safe to see each other in person, you might have a virtual celebration where you all cook/bake similar foods or all wear ugly sweaters. Talk about how this year will be different and include other family members in the decision-making process.

Skip the holiday.

If you don't feel like celebrating, that is okay. You have the right to determine how, when, and if you will celebrate. If it feels too difficult to skip the event entirely, create a game plan on how you can leave early if things get overwhelming.

Find ways to occupy your time.

Maybe explore hobbies that you always wanted to try or pick back up old hobbies that once brought you joy. You could start reading books that you have collecting dust on the shelves or listen to a new podcast you've been meaning to check out. Or maybe bundle up and go for a winter hike?

Have compassion for yourself!

This is hard and it will probably continue to be hard. Don't be too critical of yourself if you are having trouble getting everything on your to do list accomplished. Take a microbreak, stretch, and do things that will help fill your cup. And if you feel like you need some external support, find a therapist near you.