

myTherapy Holiday Tips

Surviving the Holidayze

myTherapyNYC
Counseling & Wellness Services

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The myTherapyNYC staff compiled a collection of tips on how to survive the holidays. We hope you find it useful for dealing with all the stresses of the holiday season.

We wish you peace, joy and prosperity this holiday season.

All the best for a healthy and happy 2015!

CHAPTER 1

CULTIVATE GRATITUDE

WRITTEN BY JOSEPH A. ZAGAME, LCSW

For many of us, the holidays can be a tough time of year. Any number of emotions can come up. But what if you could learn a better way to “survive” the holidays and give yourself the ultimate gift: gratitude? By more fully appreciating the people in your life, individual circumstances and yourself, you will fill yourself with a bit more joy and happiness than was there before.

Gratitude, however, doesn’t just appear. It needs to be cultivated. So here are a few quick pointers on how you can enhance appreciation in your life:

- Shift your focus. It is easy to get bogged down with the negative things that irritate or anger you, so practice shifting your focus to the “good things” in your life. Remind yourself of the positive traits of a friend in a time of frustration or the kindness someone has shown you. This purposeful change in attitude will also help you to cope with challenging times as they are always made a little easier when focusing on the positive. Concentrating on where you put the emphasis in your life is a key part of gratitude and it takes practice! The holidays offer plenty of opportunities to try it out.
- Be grateful for you. When we think about gratitude, we often focus on the external: we’re thankful for the people and things in our lives. What is often left behind is the individual. Spending more time to thank yourself for who you are or admire personal progress you’ve made is just as important as an outward expression of gratitude. In fact, to have the right mindset to appreciate others, we must first start with ourselves. While you might think it is self-serving gesture, it’s a necessary part of

incorporating gratitude more fully in life. So, don't forget to set aside a few minutes of your schedule this holiday season to be with yourself and say "thank you."

- Incorporate a small gratitude routine. It may sound cheesy, but try to keep a gratitude journal or share some expressions of gratitude with another. Write down a few things you are grateful for – a helpful conversation, encouragement you've offered yourself or a smile from a stranger. Or send an email to a friend to thank them. Nothing is too small. Reflecting on the "little things" will help us to more clearly see how full our lives are.

Above all, if you commit to focusing energy on gratitude, you will invite more joy into your life. And during times that might be overwhelming -- like the holidays -- it may be just the right comforting you need!

CHAPTER 2
**MANAGING YOUR EXPECTATIONS
FOR THE HOLIDAYS**

JUAN OLMEDO, LCSW

Before the holidays even begin, decorations go up in public places and the radio begins to bombard us with cheery music about sleigh bells, carriage rides and candy canes! This creates pressure to enjoy each and every moment of the holidays as well as unrealistic expectations of how we should feel. Making it difficult to recognize that the holiday season does not have to be stressful.

Here are three ways to manage your expectations:

- Be honest with yourself and check-in on your feelings throughout. Many of us have experienced painful or difficult events during the holidays and memories of these can resurface every year. It is important to allow for time to reflect on past experiences and validate when reminders of past events surface. Give yourself permission to feel sadness, pain and grief. The more you give yourself the freedom to experience uncomfortable feelings, the more you can also feel joy or contentment as well.

- Plan how you want to spend your time. The expectation is that you spend the most of the holidays with family. If you have unresolved issues with any particular family member this can add to the pressure to put on a happy face or sweep things under the rug. Allow yourself the freedom to spend time with who you choose. If a sense of obligation makes tension unavoidable, set boundaries regarding how long you want to spend with someone and be clear on what topics of conversation you are comfortable with.

- Know what you're willing and able to spend on the holidays. Year after year the focus on the holidays can be all about the latest electronics or outdoing the gift from last year. But sometimes budgeting constraints don't allow for that. You can give of yourself, including your time and efforts, and offer thoughtful gifts while not breaking the bank. This can include coupons for babysitting, starting a holiday baking tradition, or making homemade gifts such as ornaments, digital photo albums, or music CDs. Additionally, you can make an agreement with friends and family on a spending limit.

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The holidays can be a time of joy and connection or bring up experiences of sadness and isolation. Pressure to stay in a "holiday spirit" regardless of real-life stressors, or to over-extend yourself emotionally and financially can create unrealistic expectations to stay as jolly as St. Nick. Staying in touch with what you're feeling and what you want from your relationships can help to manage expectations without being disingenuous. Enjoy your authentic self and the holiday season can be the "most wonderful time of the year."

CHAPTER 3

BE PRESENT DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON

WRITTEN BY GLENN ZERMEÑO, LCSW

The holiday season is a time of year when families, friends, and communities come together across cultures to celebrate. It is a time when we begin to see many images of joyous celebration, feasting, spending, and comfort. Coupled with that can come feelings of stress or distress. While the reasons for these feelings may be complex, options for coping can sometimes be simple. The practice of being present during times of stress and distress may help ease the difficulty.

Here are a few ways to practice being present during the holiday season:

- Take a few moments to become centered and connect to your body. Find a comfortable place to sit quietly with your feet flat on the ground and your hands resting on your legs. Begin at the tips of your toes and scan through each part of your body, moving from the feet to the legs, the hips, torso and so on — all the way to the crown of your head. Take a second to process how each part of your body feels. You may notice tightness or tension in some areas and discover ease or relaxation in others. When we feel stressed or anxious it may feel all-consuming. Scanning through your body can reveal areas where you hold stress or tension.
- Notice what thoughts and feelings are present in your mind. Once you have scanned through your body, take a few moments to process what is going on in your mind. You may notice persistent thoughts or worry, anticipation of things to come or feelings about things that have passed. Giving full attention to your thoughts and feelings may feel overwhelming; however, it is possible that giving attention to your

thoughts and feelings may allow you to better process what is going on.

- **Breathe.** When we are feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed, we often are not breathing at the full capacity of our lungs; breathing may be shallow and constricted. Feelings of stress and distress can feel scary, overwhelming, and tiring. Simply focusing on your breathing and noticing breath moving in and out of your nose signals to the brain to slow down. Shifting your attention to your breathing can help to bring you back to the present moment. You may notice a slight change in your mood. Breathing mindfully means breathing slowly with intention to focus on your breath moving in and out of your nose. Your breath is with you wherever you go. Do not forget to breathe.

- **Focus on the Present Moment.** When you are able to connect to your body, bring awareness to your thoughts and feelings, and breathe mindfully you will be more present in the moment. Focusing on the present moment allows space to honor loss or issues from the past. It can even allow you to relax and not worry about things that have not yet occurred.

Taking a few moments to become centered in your body, notice your thoughts, and practice mindful breathing is just one way to help manage the stress and distress that may come up during the holiday season. The practice of being in the moment is one of many tools you can add to your resources to help you navigate difficult situations and feelings during the holidays. You will find these techniques applicable in all areas of your life.

CHAPTER 4

EAT MINDFULLY THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

SAM GUZZARDI, LCSW

For many of us, our happiest memories of the holiday time are inextricably intertwined with the sensory experience of eating. We think about the smell of a family recipe in the oven; we relish in the thought of the taste of a “treat” that we only indulge in during a special time of year. At the same time, for those of us who have any tendency towards dysfunctional patterns in our eating, the holidays are a time when those behaviors are likely to emerge. Eating mindfully, or with awareness of our feelings of hunger and fullness, is a key way to avoid unhealthy or unhelpful eating patterns during the holiday season.

Consider this: A recent study found that people who are already overweight gained more than five pounds in the time between Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Jr. Day. And although not everyone gains weight during the holidays, a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that the pounds gained in these months are unlikely to be lost.

Part of this can surely be explained by the presence of high-calorie foods that are a part of many holiday traditions. But, as another recent scientific study shows, it is unlikely that just one day of overeating is responsible for any weight gain of note. Much more probable, it seems, is that it is the prolonged stressors and disruption of daily routines that accounts for weight gain and other unhealthy holiday habits.

This makes sense given what else we know about holiday times: it is a time of year filled with both celebration and stress. Psychiatric emergency room visits are notoriously high, reports of medical illness

related to alcohol abuse spike, and reports of travel-related stress peak. And given what we now know about emotional eating—that is, the tendency to eat when not hungry due to stress or distress—this seems like a much more plausible explanation for holiday weight gain.

What to do? Luckily, a series of widely-accepted guidelines have been developed for how to eat mindfully during the holidays and otherwise. By being aware of our feelings of fullness and hunger, we can prevent eating and weight gain associated with stress and take care of our selves and bodies throughout the holiday season.

Check out the following tips for how to eat mindfully all year long:

- Be aware. Am I hungry right now? Check in with your body to see if you're actually craving food or if "emotional hunger" is fueling your desire to eat.
- Love your body a different way. Engaging in another soothing, body-based activity is the best way to curb emotional hunger. Consider giving yourself a gentle foot rub, doing some calm stretching, or lying with a cool compress gently on your face.
- Eat and only eat. Our society may program us to multi-task, but the best way to eat mindfully is to stop what you're doing and give your food 100% of your attention. When you eat, just eat!
- Take sensory bites. One of the greatest benefits of mindful eating is that it helps us really enjoy our food! Instead of gobbling down whatever is in front of you, slow down the pace of your eating and savor each bite. Try to experience food using each of your five senses, being aware of the flavor, sight, texture, smell, and sounds the food makes as you chew it.
- Mind your mind. Harsh self-talk about food and body image often

disavows us from the process of eating. When you notice yourself being critical of your body or food choices, find ways to talk to yourself that are kinder and more reality-based.

Without a doubt, the holiday season is a time when our least healthy eating patterns have a tendency to creep out. But don't fear—a little awareness goes a long way! By following these tips for mindful eating, and by simply approaching the holiday season with awareness that we are more likely to be triggered around whatever our issues may be, we become more likely to embody the age-old saying that “with awareness comes choices.” Choose wellness during the holidays this year!

CHAPTER 5
**GIVE YOURSELF THE
GIFT OF SELF CARE**

NIKKI LUTIN, LCSW

Although the holidays are intended to leave us feeling fulfilled, loved, and accomplished, they often leave us feeling more stress than pleasure.

Many people are concerned with the amount of time they need to spend with family members during the holidays, and often feel a sense of dread in the weeks leading up. Being surrounded by family, and often being a visitor in a family member's home, can be overwhelming and often difficult to navigate. There is a magnitude of pressure to be jolly, say "yes" to all festivities, and to spend a significant amount of time with others. It is imperative that we remember to take care of ourselves by doing what we can to reduce our stress during the holiday season.

Here are ways to give yourself the gift of self care and to conquer the stress of increased family commitment during the holiday season:

- Remember to engage in the healthy behaviors that help us manage stress throughout the rest of the year. These healthy behaviors include eating healthy, maintaining an exercise routine, getting enough sleep, and continuing meditation or other spiritual rituals. Although some of these may be difficult to do when you're in someone else's home, you should remember to make an extra effort to stay true to them!

- Say "no" to some of the obligations you feel are not completely necessary for you to do or to attend. It's healthy to participate in all festivities. Sometimes, setting boundaries by simply saying "no" to a family member can make all the difference in the world.

- Make a mental list of what you want the holidays to mean to you this year. When you keep the positive components of the holidays in the back of your mind, you are more likely to avoid unwanted stress.
- Spend time with the family you actually enjoy. Sometimes our closest friends can be considered family more than our actual blood relatives. Make sure to spend time with people who make you the happiest.
- Initiate plans in advance so that you are able to do things on your own terms, versus always succumbing to other people's plans. If you make a plan in advance, you'll be mentally prepared and avoid feeling overwhelmed.
- Keep busy at a party by helping the host. This way you are more focused on helping others and less focused on your own misery or anxieties.
- Do everything in moderation. Do not overextend yourself! Eat in moderation, drink in moderation, and reside in the family room in moderation! If you need a breather, volunteer to do an errand so you can get out of the house for a while. Taking time for yourself can help you gain perspective and realize how to better manage what is going on inside the home.
- Allow time to grieve. We are often reminded of the family members who are not with us during holiday season. It is ok to feel sad and to reflect on the past. Take time to grieve for the loved ones who may not be with you this year.
- Establish realistic expectations. Nothing is perfect, including your family. Let go of false illusions of what "should be" and celebrate "what is." It also helps to dismiss the idea that you are expected to do everything. Do not be afraid to ask for help and support when needed!

- Pamper yourself with extra love. You are allowed to give yourself a gift, get a massage, read a great book, or take a time-out to watch your favorite movie. It's OK to have fun!

These small initiatives will help you manage some of the added stress of being surrounded by family members during the holidays. The most important thing to remember is to stay true to yourself and to continue the habits that get you through "regular" days. If you take care of yourself, the holidays do not have to be a time of stress!

CHAPTER 6

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

WRITTEN BY MATT CARTWRIGHT, LCSW

“Tis the season to be jolly”... wouldn’t that be nice? Holidays are one of the most stressful times of the year. We face several demands and expectations that can produce anxiety. Family and friends want the celebrations to be fun and joyful. Getting together to spend time with those we love can stir up old, unresolved memories. We may even feel a certain sense of obligation. This causes stress, which can lead to challenges in communicating our wants and needs.

In order to ensure that your holiday season is filled with joy and fun, there are a few things to remember so that you communicate in a healthy and effective way this holiday season.

Below are some ideas to keep in mind and practice while communicating with others:

- Set the intention to connect by being present and joyful when around others. Avoid being the “bah-humbug” of the group. Share in the spirit of love and joy. Be courageous by letting down your guard for a minute. Take a moment to remember that we are all in this together. Share from a space of common humanity. Give your full attention to the person you are connecting with by looking them directly in the eye. Turn off distractions, such as cell phones and TV.
- Be clear on what you want. Doing something out of a sense of obligation can cause resentment. Resentment can lead to irritability and passive aggressive responses in our communications. Be clear about

your wants with others. Be honest about your choices instead of worrying about what others will think. If you show up at a party with negative energy and you really do not want to be there, your energy will have an impact on the mood of the event.

- Speak in 1st person and avoid blaming, complaining, judging and criticizing. When speaking with others use "I" statements. "I want to share my experience about..." "I am feeling anxious and stressed about what is happening." Avoid statements like "You make me feel anxious and stressed with all your behavior." Anytime the ego hears the word "you," it wants to defend and protect itself. Speaking in 1st person requires focusing on the self and allows you to hear the inner thoughts of the mind.

- Own your feelings and your experience while communicating about what just happened. Reflect on your personal experience in the moment and avoid talking about everything that has happened in the past. Always start by objectively owning your feelings in the moment. Check in with your body and share what is happening within you. Describe the feeling, mood, sensation, or attitude. "My experience is that I am feeling a tightness in my stomach. I am feeling some anxiety. I need your help in understanding my feelings when _____ happened." Share your observations and remember that your thoughts influence your feelings. Own what is yours without projecting onto others. Be aware that the person you are communicating with could be triggered by old memories and past history.

- Let go of gossiping this season. Getting together with family may be a time to catch up and talk about current events in your life. It is important to be mindful and avoid gossiping about others. Sharing your individual experiences will allow you to connect more authentically with family. Gossip is a negative time distraction and is sometimes thought of as a defense mechanism. Ask yourself... "Is this important?" "Does it need to be said by me?" "Does it need to be said by me at this time?" "Is what I am saying kind?"

- Avoid Score Keeping. This means do not keep a mental tally sheet. The ego likes to dwell on events from the past and save them for the right time to dump them on someone else. Avoid talking about what happened three Christmases ago. Avoid talking about how you got someone a really nice gift and they only gave you a \$5 gift card. This tit-for-tat approach creates resentments, anger, blame, and isolation. This keeps us stuck in the past instead of being present with our loved ones right now.
- Pay attention to acknowledge and duplicate what the other has said. Be mindful to repeat what the other person has said. Repeat it to their satisfaction. "What I heard you say is _____. Did I get that?" Make sure the other person has clearly been heard and understood before moving to your feelings and perceptions.
- Remember to connect with the feeling first and problem solve last. Too often we jump to try and fix a situation. We often bypass what the emotional experience was in order to make the ego feel better. The ego likes to think, analyze, blame and fix. Go to the source of the feeling. Have an experience of the emotion and the physiological sensations. Be with it for 20 seconds without trying to "do" anything. Once the feelings have begun to pass and move through the body, then we can seek to resolve situations. Otherwise the emotions will overtake the situation and blind us from seeing what solutions are available. We need to be heard, be understood and have our feelings acknowledged; once this has happened we can move forward.
- Set boundaries before family gatherings. If you know that there may be challenges with a family member (s) ahead of time, then clear it up before the whole family is there. Talk to your family members before the holidays start. Set aside time to discuss any issues in private, without others around. When the holiday comes boundaries will be in place and everyone should feel comfortable and safe to connect.

Healthy communication is the key to a successful relationship and it takes practice. Be gentle with yourself and remember that with positive intention everything can work out. If you use these suggestions, your holidays will have the opportunity to be filled with all the joy and love you desire. Remember that if you show up with respect and consideration it will help others reciprocate the same. Practice your communication skills all year round to ensure happy and connected relationships in the years to come.

ABOUT MYTHERAPYNYC

myTherapyNYC is a mental health group practice that offers counseling and wellness services to individuals and couples in Chelsea & Midtown Manhattan, New York City. Our mission is to empower the individual by guiding them along the journey of personal growth and change. Our therapists take a personalized and holistic approach to therapy by focusing on all aspects of you.

While our primary service is mental health counseling, we also provide wellness services through a network of affiliated providers. We believe wellness services can enhance your work in therapy. Our focus is your well being and we are here to provide a supportive environment to help you come closer to achieving a more fulfilled life. We aim to help you find a therapist that is right for you.

Our practice specializes with issues related to:

Depression & Anxiety

Relationships & Intimacy

LGBTQ

Trauma & Loss

Alcohol & Drug Concerns

Self Esteem & Body Image Issues

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