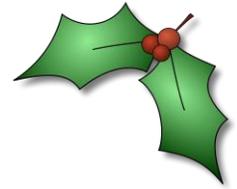


Your Employee & Family Assistance Program



Managing Expectations During the Pandemic Holidays

Holidays and family get-togethers can be both joy-filled and at times stressful. While many people look forward to the holiday season, there are many who dread it for different reasons. As we face the COVID-19 pandemic, these times can be exceptionally challenging as restrictions increase and cases rise across the country.

The pandemic has led to increased experiences of fear of yourself or family becoming ill, confusion over continually changing restrictions, grief as a result of the loss of an individual infected by the virus, loss of traditions or milestones, conflict amongst families trying to navigate restrictions and expectations, increased financial stress from job loss or a reduction in income, and the feeling of isolation if you are spending the holiday alone or without those that you want to be with. Many have also unearthed new resiliency, opportunities, and protective factors.

Being Alone Is Not Uncommon

Humans are social beings, so being alone through the holiday season can be a painful time for some. People can end up by themselves on holidays for a variety of reasons. Some live far away from family or have jobs that require they work the holiday. Those who are grieving sometimes choose to spend the day alone. Others have challenging family dynamics that can turn a happy holiday into an upsetting or stressful day of problems that they would rather avoid. Thus, being alone on a significant holiday can be a useful choice in some circumstances.

Acknowledge the Loss you Feel

Grief and loss are a natural response to losing someone, or something, loved and it is uniquely individual and often isolating. It is not only death and dying which bring upon feelings of loss and grief. It may be distance (physical or emotional), it may be a break-up, separation, or divorce, the loss of routine or employment, the loss of milestones, celebrations, and traditions, and many other losses including the loss of a beloved pet. Holidays and special occasions often intensify the grief response, especially when the loss has been recent.

Take Care of Your Mental Health

Feelings of anxiety and stress during the holiday season are common for a variety of reasons. Mental health challenges can be triggered by financial strain, negative family dynamics, childcare issues, shipping and shopping delays, food shortages, the winter blues, and many other individual reasons.

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With the holidays around the corner, we want to help you manage different experiences you may face this holiday season, whether grief, stress, anxiety, or loneliness.

With a few simple tips you can keep your mental health in check and enjoy the holiday season:

Stick to a Budget. Expenses can easily get out of control during this time of year. To help with your stress levels, set a budget early on and stick to it. Avoid buying gifts with a credit card, where possible. Consider a group gift sharing option or your own gift “checklist” that includes a budget per person to use with family and family to keep your spending in check. Be realistic about what you can handle.

Feel your emotions. The holidays can trigger difficult emotions and make people reflect on how things used to be or how they wish things were this year. Allow yourself to feel sad, disappointed, or anything that might come up. You can write in a journal, talk to a friend, or call your EAP to process your emotions. Whatever you are feeling is okay.

Acknowledge Grief. If you've lost a loved one or are separated from loved ones, acknowledge that things won't be the same. Consider honoring the individual(s) that is not present or starting new traditions in their memory. Know that it's normal to feel sadness and grief and know that it's okay to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because of the time of year. Grief has no time frame and the third or fourth or fifteenth holiday season may be just as painful as the first.

“Re-frame” Loneliness. Re-framing is a healthy way of choosing to look at a situation another way, typically focusing on the positive or the potential. Your holiday season may not be what you hoped it would be, but you can try and adjust your expectations or perspective in these uncertain times. Recognizing that you are alone now, but that doesn't mean you are alone always and treat yourself by taking this time to do something nice for yourself. It doesn't have to be extravagant, just something that helps you care for yourself and boost your mood.

Practice Mindfulness. The reality is, we only have right now. Not dwelling on the past and not worrying about the future can make your holiday celebrations a success. It can also make you a happier person in general. Focus on your needs and what is happening at this very moment and enjoy it. There is a resilience and “healing capacity” in the present moment. Practicing mindfulness helps us to prevent “getting out of focus” by staying present with what is most meaningful for you.

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Stay Connected. Being distant or estranged from family and friends can result in loneliness. Keep yourself busy with activities or people you enjoy, even if that means socially distanced walks, phone calls, or video chats. Knowing that you have something to look forward to can give you that extra energy to get through some of the more difficult times.

Avoid a Social Media Tailspin. Social media can contribute to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression, especially during the holidays. So, consider limiting your time online. At the very least, remain aware of its potential to show you an unrealistic view of life.

Let Go of Resentments. Decide what grievances you'll let go of for the day. You aren't the only one feeling stress, hurting, or getting triggered. Sometimes, being around family requires us to forget about past issues and simply enjoy everyone despite them. Remember the holidays are supposed to be about what is meaningful for you. Sometimes having heightened expectations about resolving conflict during the holidays can lead to disappointment. You can save the big issues or discussions for another time.

Have a Lifeline. Make plans ahead of time to connect with a friend during the festivities to support each other. Hearing a friendly voice can help you sort out your feelings when you are overwhelmed or stressed. Processing stress with a friend usually leads to a few therapeutic laughs.

Help others. Helping other people over the holidays can help boost your mood, whether family, friends, or strangers. Look to your community for creative opportunities to give back. There may be opportunities to help others while still adhering to restrictions to keep you and others safe.

Holiday stress comes in all forms, but preparation and planning can help you appreciate this time of year, avoid isolation, and learn how to take control of your emotions while enjoying what the season offers. It is okay if the holiday season does not turn out how you wanted it to. Do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself.

If you are in need of assistance during the holidays, connect with your EFAP for support. There are several services that can assist, including counselling, financial coaching, nutrition or health coaching, and others. We are available 24/7 and we are here to help.