

Worker Well-being During Covid-19

This is the first holiday season since the COVID-19 pandemic began, which has impacted everyone, whether through financial loss, illness, the impact of isolation, or the loss of loved ones. It also caps off a year of social unrest due to racial injustice and an election plagued by uncertainty. During so much hardship, it is difficult to connect with the feelings of thankfulness and cheer that are typically associated with the season. But, for instance, [holiday card sales](#) are booming, which points to a widespread desire to connect in a year where public health and safety have demanded the opposite. Our roundup of [tips to foster well-being](#) during COVID is a solid foundation for coping with the stresses of the season, but [here](#) is additional guidance to help navigate the special challenges posed by the holidays.

Holidays are often stressful even under normal circumstances

The holidays often present a dizzying array of demands — shopping, baking, and caring for children who are home from school, to name just a few. The spread of COVID-19 brings additional stress and worry about personal health and loved ones' health. Feeling sad or anxious because holiday plans may look different during the COVID-19 pandemic brings additional stress. The following tips can help [minimize holiday stress](#):

- **Acknowledge feelings.** If unable to be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness and grief. It is OK to take time to cry or express feelings. Happiness cannot be forced just because it is the holiday season.
- **Reach out.** If feeling lonely or isolated, seek out community, religious or other social events or communities. Many have websites, online support groups, social media sites, or virtual events. Volunteering personal time or doing something to help others also is a good way to lift spirits and broaden friendships. [Sending and receiving holiday cards](#) is a tradition that can bridge the gap of missing connections and which are likely to brighten the recipients' season as well — though consider the tone of a card, as they may have been hit hard by the pandemic.
- **Be realistic.** The holidays do not have to be perfect or just like last year, especially with COVID. Even though holiday plans may look different this year, there are ways to celebrate. Even if celebrating alone, perhaps prepare a special meal, decorate a table, light a candle.
- **Stick to a budget.** Holidays can be expensive, and this year has impacted personal finances for millions of people. Before gift and food shopping, decide what is affordable, then stick to a budget. Do not try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Instead try donating to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts, or start a family gift exchange.
- **Do not abandon healthy habits.** Do not let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to stress and guilt. [Healthy routines](#), including a good diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep, are a key component of COVID wellness.
- **Seek professional help if needed.** Despite best efforts, feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores may manifest. If these feelings last for a while, talk to a doctor or a mental health professional.

COVID complicates existing seasonal depression.

[Seasonal depression, or seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), is a type of depression that is related to a change in seasons. In 2020, dealing with shorter, colder days is compounded by dealing with additional stressors like COVID-19 and what has continued to be a contentious election season. SAD, too, will be

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even harder this year. A [recent study](#) found that compared to the time before the pandemic, the number of US adults experiencing depressive symptoms has tripled. As major stressors compound, the continued feelings of isolation, financial stress, and uncertainty from the pandemic can exacerbate SAD symptoms. This is in part because the pandemic is naturally creating some of the conditions that often trigger SAD, like not getting out of the house as much and spending less time outside. The following techniques can help manage [symptoms of seasonal depression](#):

- **Light therapy.** Reduced sunlight can lead to a drop in serotonin, which stabilizes mood and maintains feelings of well-being and happiness. Light therapy boxes mimic natural outdoor light and can help boost brain chemicals linked to mood. If having a particularly hard time waking up, for instance, any bright light first thing in the morning can help. As soon as the alarm goes off, turn on the lamp and open the shades, then hopping right back in bed for five more minutes might prove helpful
- **Spend time in the sun when possible.** In the winter, it is easy to fall into the cycle of waking up, working all day, and then, by the time it is ready to enjoy the evening, it's dark outside. Make a conscious effort to get outside every day. It doesn't have to be a big excursion or even a full walk around the block – just 15 minutes on the front porch or sitting on a park bench can help. Getting outdoors for an extended period on weekends might help during the week, too. If it's too cold to stay out long, try sitting by a sunny window. Not getting enough sun may cause a vitamin D deficiency, which can cause fatigue and mood changes, as well as reduced serotonin activity. Taking a daily vitamin D supplement may also help boost mood and energy levels.
- **Connect with others.** One of the biggest parts of seasonal depression is feeling isolated. With COVID-19, many people started feeling Zoom fatigue after a few weeks of virtual hangouts and stopped. Now is a good time to get back into it; just be aware of limits to avoid burnout. Resist the temptation to deem the whole season “cancelled” or to further isolate.
- **Get help if symptoms are interfering with life.** Seasonal depression is more than the “winter blues”. If it is hard to function normally, find extra support. SAD is a valid type of depression, and many people find working with a therapist to be effective during the tougher months. [Telehealth](#) has become much easier to access since the pandemic began.

Seek out and savor the positives

Making an inventory of things to be thankful for is a typical part of the holiday season, but it may be especially challenging this year. Nevertheless, seeking, savoring, and honoring [any and all wins](#)—even just getting out of bed or sending a holiday card—is vital to mental and emotional health. This is also known as “reframing,” where a person sees something from a different perspective, so the whole picture is accurately viewed and represented. For instance, “I’m not celebrating Thanksgiving this year because I can’t be with my family” becomes “I won’t be able to be with my family this Thanksgiving because I’m prioritizing their health and safety.”

Same traditions, different settings

While hosting a virtual holiday dinner is not the same as seeing family and friends in person, including their signature dish is like including them. Getting a secret family recipe can also provide an opportunity for bonding, getting their cooking tips can also mean catching up and reminiscing on holidays past. That’s where the [virtual recipe swap](#) comes in: For any dishes that are absolute staples in a holiday spread, get the original recipe from its maker and share it with the family. Each household replicates the dish in its own kitchen and shares the results with everyone. This can be done via a Zoom call or by creating an online photo gallery of all the iterations of the dishes. If living in proximity, each can prepare

a dish and gather to divide portions outside in a socially distant manner. [Holiday cookie swaps](#) can be adapted in a similar way. (It should be noted that sharing food prepared by people outside your household is still a risk.)

Look forward to future celebrations

As we approach the [one-year anniversary](#) of the first cases of the pandemic, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that it will end eventually as [vaccines are developed](#). If dwelling on the lost time with family, consider [looking ahead](#) to the holiday season in 2021 and planning a special celebration as a family. Try something new that breaks with tradition and embraces things that were not possible during quarantine, such as a destination Thanksgiving or spending the holiday planning a family trip for whenever it is safe to travel together again. Practice gratitude and try not to [romanticize typical holiday plans](#).

Staying distant keeps your loved ones safe

The [current CDC guidelines for holidays](#) are to celebrate at home with the people who live with you. In-person gatherings indoors have the potential to turn into [super-spreader events](#). It may be cold comfort at the end of a year that has already demanded so much sacrifice, but some may find solace in the knowledge that avoiding holiday gatherings is one of the best ways to [protect family](#) and other loved ones during this time.

What if there are family disagreements about COVID risks?

Holiday gatherings with extended family can be contentious under normal circumstances. The current divisive political climate and misinformation surrounding COVID risk/mask-wearing have compounded this. When navigating the holidays, the following [principles](#) may be helpful.

- **Set clear expectations.** State expectations as clearly as possible. For example, “We would love nothing more than to hug every one of you, but we will be keeping 6 feet apart at our gathering.” Or be clear if planning to skip gatherings entirely.
- **Be kind and firm.** When family members have different plans, assert personal plans in a way that respects everybody’s needs. Be clear about personal boundaries and plans without feeling a need to justify personal choices. No excessive explanations or excuses are needed.
- **Communicate with “I” statements.** “I don’t feel comfortable gathering for the holidays this year. Doing so does not feel safe or the right choice for me.” “I” statements [allow personal choices to be heard](#) without attacking someone else’s feelings or views.
- **Assume the best.** When choices conflict with someone else’s, it’s easy to make ego-driven assumptions about their motive. Preemptively deciding to make the most generous possible explanation for others’ behavior, allows hope they would reciprocate.
- **Beware a war of wills.** Getting invested in an argument that feels like a showdown and wanting to win can be avoided by choosing to be magnanimous instead. That does not sacrifice safety or common sense, just being selective about which battles are worth fighting.
- **Practice acceptance.** Considering personal intentions for the time spent with family can help define personal characteristics in this holiday season, unlike any before. How to let these family members know they are held dear -- whether in agreement? Maintaining integrity while balancing sometimes competing commitments and differences in opinion is a challenge.

If there is [pushback](#) from family about not attending holiday gatherings, [lead with feelings](#) and consider conveying that this is just a personal feeling that is keeping them safe from harm. Make it clear that the

situation is not ideal. Acknowledge that missing a holiday is not something to be taken lightly, and that it is okay for everyone involved to be sad and frustrated about it and having different feelings.

Volunteer to prevent feelings of isolation

The act of [volunteering](#) can provide a great source of comfort. Helping people who are not as fortunate can also feel less lonely or isolated and more connected to community. The compounding factors of unemployment, financial hardship, and public health crisis have no shortage of need, and many nonprofits have taken [major financial hits](#) as households tighten budgets, so volunteering is a great way to help. The organization of choice may offer safe ways to volunteer.

Rethink your resolutions

Typical New Year's resolutions set people up for failure. Research shows that as many as 50% of adults in the United States make New Year's resolutions, but [fewer than 10% keep them](#) for more than a few months. Stress and hardship related to COVID-19 may make it even more difficult to prioritize New Year's resolutions in 2021. To make it easier to keep New Year's resolutions, take a multi-faceted approach. Here are a few tips that may help:

- **Find a purpose but avoid focusing on a specific outcome.** Asking "why" will help find a real purpose, which will help to improve motivation. Setting a goal of achieving better health to have more energy for hobbies, for example, takes the focus off a specific outcome, such as reaching a particular weight.
- **Break a goal into components and set realistic and achievable process goals.** Identifying the components is just the first step. Set realistic and achievable process goals for each component that make you feel excited and motivated. The more excited about process goals, the more likely the time to focus on achieving them can be found.
- **Make a public commitment.** Human beings are inherently social and want to connect with and feel accepted by others to avoid experiencing feelings of shame and embarrassment that can sometimes be associated with letting people down. Making a public commitment to achieving a goal can help personal accountability and, ultimately, follow through.
- **Engage with like-minded people.** People tend to be more successful at achieving their goals when they connect with other like-minded people. Also, we tend to model the behavior of the people we like and admire, so it is important to be surrounded by people who reinforce habits that will help achieve goals.
- **...or just skip the resolution this year.** If committing to life change feels like too much during drastic changes that are beyond our control, it is okay to pass on this tradition.

Help children cope with disappointment

Children and parents with children at home may find the holidays especially difficult. Under normal circumstances, the holidays are a welcome break from school and work routines with extra time spent together at home. However, this year has been one long unbroken spell of time at home for parents and children, so it is natural for there to be disappointment or heightened tension. Pediatric psychiatrists offer varying [coping mechanisms for different ages](#):

- **0-3 years old:** Focus on quality time during the holidays – and don't worry about the details.
- **4-6 years old:** Create new, quarantine-approved holiday traditions.
- **6-12 years old:** Help children cope with holiday blues – and build resilience for the future.
- **13-18 years old:** Ask, listen, and encourage COVID-safe holiday activities.
- **Parents and caregivers:** Manage disappointment about the holidays, whether that means feeling sad, doing something self-nurturing, or adjusting expectations.

Looking forward to a new year

For many, the holidays are a time to express gratitude and care for others. This year, self-care and looking for the safest and most manageable ways to celebrate the spirit of the season will help. The fact that seasons pass is one of their defining characteristics. COVID has been a long one for everyone, but it, too, shall pass.



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Mental Health Resources & COVID-19 Information Sources

- [Mental Health Services – Washington State Health Care Authority](#)
- [Behavioral Health Services – Oregon Health Authority](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control](#)
- [CDC Winter Holiday Guidance](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)
- [Medline \(US National Library of Medicine\)](#)
- [Food & Drug Administration](#)
- [American Psychiatric Association](#)
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)
- [Public Health – Seattle & King County](#)
- [Washington State Department of Health](#)
- [Oregon Health Authority](#)

Sources

[Isolated by pandemic, Americans are sending more Christmas and holiday cards to stay in touch](#)

NBC News | Article | Corky Siemaszko | 12 December 2020

Hallmark's biggest selling card this season is a Christmas card that expresses a sentiment that millions of Americans cut off from the people they love can relate to, namely "wish we were together."

[The US will have 40M doses of the COVID vaccine by the end of the year. How many people should get them?](#)

USA Today | Article | Adrianna Rodriguez | 7 December 2020

It plans to distribute half of those in December and hold back the other half to give the same people their second dose of the two-shot regimen.

[Why we make \(and break\) New Year's resolutions, and 4 tips to help you achieve your goals](#)

Western Connecticut Health Network | Article | Charles Herrick | 7 December 2020

Stress and hardship related to COVID-19 may make it even more difficult to prioritize New Year's resolutions in 2021.

[Covid can't stop the holiday cookie swap](#)

CNN | Article | Casey Barber | 5 December 2020

The easiest way to do a cookie swap in the middle of a pandemic is — where else? — online. There are a few ways to pull off a virtual cookie swap.

[Saying No to the Holidays During COVID-19? How to Break It to Family \(or Friends\)](#)

KQED | Article | Carly Severn | 1 December 2020

How can you have that tricky conversation with loved ones without creating a rift, or unduly hurting someone's feelings?

[Nonprofits are struggling to do more with less money, but donors and volunteers can help: 5 questions answered](#)

The Conversation | Article | Erica Mills Barnhart | 30 November 2020

Historically, nonprofits have gotten nearly a third of their charitable donations just during the month of December.

[Will Thanksgiving Be a National Super-Spreader Event?](#)

The RAND Blog | Blog | Carter C. Price | 24 November 2020

The risk will depend on the size of individual holiday gatherings across the country and the rate of COVID-19 cases in each community.

[How to cope without typical holiday traditions this year — and even start some new ones](#)

CBS News | Article | Caitlin O'Kane | 13 November 2020

For those whose family members are insisting on in-person gatherings, experts recommend being "assertive, not aggressive" with boundaries.

[How to Cancel the Holidays Without Ruining Them](#)

Slate | Article | Rebecca Onion | 13 November 2020

Make plans to do something really special next Thanksgiving.

[Send Joy During a Stressful Year With a Holiday Card](#)

New York Times | Article | Sarah Firshein | 13 November 2020

You can still connect with loved ones near and far with a holiday card, and referencing the pandemic is OK. Just be mindful of your tone [Stress, depression and the holidays: Tips for coping](#)

Mayo Clinic | Article | 11 November 2020

Stress and depression can ruin your holidays and hurt your health. Being realistic, planning ahead and seeking support can help ward off stress and depression.

[How To Do A Virtual Thanksgiving Recipe Swap](#)

HuffPost | Article | Abigail Abesamis Demarest | 10 November 2020

If you're separated from loved ones due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensure that your favorite family dishes will be part of your holiday spread by planning now.

[How to Handle the Holidays When Your Family Doesn't Agree on COVID-19](#)

WebMD | Blog | Seth J. Gillihan | 3 November 2020

Conflict can arise on any number of topics, like politics, religion, and whether or not to brine the turkey. And now there's the potential for strong disagreement about COVID-19 precautions.

[How to Help Kids Handle Holiday Disappointment During COVID-19](#)

Connecticut Children's | Blog | Amy Adolfo Signore, Emily Wakefield | 30 October 2020

This year has been difficult to say the least. With the holidays approaching – and the challenges and uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic still ongoing – you may be wondering how to help your child cope with the disappointment of things being different this year. Connecticut Children's pediatric psychologists join the blog with advice.

[Keeping your family safe this Thanksgiving](#)

Harvard Health Publishing | Blog | Claire McCarthy | 29 October 2020

While experts advise skipping gatherings this Thanksgiving, here are some recommendations to help limit risks for people who plan to celebrate the holiday with others.

[8 Ways to Cope If You Can't See Family and Friends This Holiday Season](#)

Real Simple | Article | Lindsay Tigar | 20 October 2020

Seeking, savoring, and honoring any and all wins—even just getting out of bed or sending a holiday card—is vital to mental and emotional health.

[Not giving Grandma COVID-19 is this holiday season's best gift](#)

Northwestern | Article | Kristin Samuelson | 19 October 2020

When family members disagree about COVID-19 safety precautions, planning holiday celebrations is fraught with conflict and potential health risk.

[How to Navigate Family Disagreements on COVID-19 Risk](#)

Advent Health | Blog | 15 October 2020

Here are 10 steps you can take to navigate family interactions when you disagree on the risk of catching or spreading COVID-19.

[COVID-19 and your mental health](#)

May Clinic | Article | 15 October 2020

Self-care strategies are good for your mental and physical health and can help you take charge of your life. Take care of your body and your mind and connect with others to benefit your mental health.

[Prevalence of Depression Symptoms in US Adults Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

JAMA Network | Article | Catherine K. Ettman et al | 2 September 2020

Findings suggest that there is a high burden of depression symptoms in the US associated with the pandemic and that this burden falls disproportionately on individuals who are already at increased risk.

[Using Telehealth to Meet Mental Health Needs During the COVID-19 Crisis](#)

Commonwealth Fund | Article | Jacob C. Warren, K. Bryant Smalley | 18 June 2020

The expansion of telehealth during the COVID-19 pandemic has been lightning fast, particularly compared to its slow trajectory before the crisis.

[Seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#)

Mayo Clinic | Article | 25 October 2017

If you're like most people with SAD, your symptoms start in the fall and continue into the winter months, sapping your energy and making you feel moody.

[Preparing For The Holidays During COVID-19](#)

Mental Health America | Article

Many people with mental health conditions find consistency important in their recovery, especially during times of high stress - like both the pandemic and the holiday season. A sudden shift in tradition may have you feeling an extreme loss of control on top of disappointment.

[Seasonal Depression/SAD And COVID-19 Complications](#)

Mental Health America | Article

In 2020, we aren't just dealing with shorter, colder days - we're dealing with additional stressors like COVID-19 and what has continued to be a contentious election season. If you experience SAD, you may be feeling it a bit harder this year.

[Maintaining Mental Health During the Holiday Season \(and a Pandemic\)](#)

National Alliance on Mental Illness California | Article

Here are some suggestions for how you can reduce stress and maintain good mental health during the holiday season.