

Reducing Holiday Stress

It's easy, in the stressful times of the holidays, to surrender your decision-making to well-meaning others. As a result, you drift into activities that are tiring, painful, or do not meet your needs. This is common, because you feel out of step with the season. Your sadness seems magnified when measured against the joy of others. That's why it is essential to plan your coping strategies now, to help reduce holiday stress later.

- Plan and set your priorities so that you are not overwhelmed. Make a list of activities you would like to do and use it to give suggestions to friends and family when they call to ask how they can help. Simplify. Decide what you really want, what you really value. Strip away all the "shoulds" from the holiday season.
- Acknowledge that your loved one will not be there this year. Plan a way to acknowledge the loss and the emotions so that everyone who wants to can share their memories. *See our handout on rituals for some ideas on how to do this.*
- Spend some quiet time to listen to your heart. Ask yourself: "Who can be present with me as I grieve? Who can tolerate and understand that I may not be my usual self?" Share your plans with family and friends, and ask for their support.
- Practice saying no. Accept only invitations that you have the energy and the desire to do. Make an escape plan. Let the host know you may need to leave early.
- Take care of your nutritional needs. Eat well. Avoid the temptation to numb the pain with food, alcohol, or drugs. Focus on the companionship of the people you are with.
- Resist isolation. Share a part of the holiday season with others to relieve some of the loneliness. Visit a soup kitchen, nursing home, hospital, or senior center. Ask someone who is alone to share the day with you and/or your family. Schedule lunch with a friend who will let you cry, ramble, or sit silently.
- Plan time for moderate exercise to release stress (health club, park, mall-walking, exercise tapes). Reconnect with nature. Go for a hike, bike ride, or stroll. Elevate your mood and fight depression by spending some time outside.
- Plan periods of rest to refresh and rejuvenate. Relax into a warm bath or shower. Sip hot tea or cool lemonade. Lie on a comfortable couch or relax into a rocking chair. Find a spot in the sun and sit in its warmth.
- Spend a moment in a quiet reflection or prayer of thanksgiving for having loved and/or having been loved.
- Write down your thoughts and memories to create a "diary" of how your grief unfolds. Journaling can be a wonderful way to express your emotions and thoughts.
- Buy lots of tissues, and place them strategically around the house. Bring your own if you think you may need them at someone else's house. Release your tension and pain by crying; change your inner world through this natural reaction to pain and sorrow.
- Reach out to your pets during your grief. Animals live one day at a time, aren't judgmental, need your care and are often available when other support is not. Sit quietly with your pet and stroking its fur or find a moment of joy by engaging in a lively game.

- Plan your own gift. Get a massage, haircut, manicure, or whatever makes you feel nurtured and special.
- Go to an event that appeals to you, and make one of the tickets a holiday gift to a friend whose company you would enjoy.

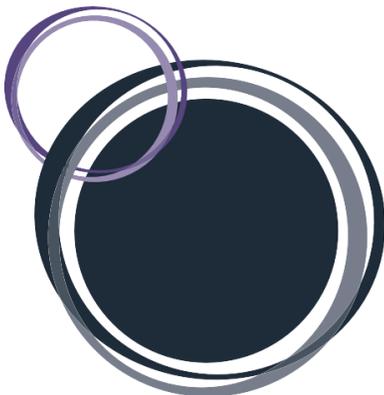
After the Holidays

Sometimes when the holidays are over, we often experience exhaustion, a kind of letdown, sadness and depression. Visiting family has gone, all of the gatherings are over, the decorations come down, and we are left with more time alone and more silence. In some ways, this may be a relief. In others, it may remind us that we are not being buffered from our feelings as we were when there were so many holiday distractions around.

As we move through these darkest, coldest, shortest days of the year, we also find ourselves indoors more, and this in itself can be depressing and lonely. There are some things we can do to make this time of year easier and prevent some of the post-holiday depression.

- Go outside during the day when the sun is out, even if it is just for a short walk. Mild exercise and sunlight help replenish our bodies and spirits.
- Make efforts to connect with people you enjoy and who can understand your experience. If you reconnected with someone that you feel can support you, let them know that you would like to continue having them in your life. Making lunch plans once or twice a month can keep you connected to the support system you have.
- Grief support groups offer you a chance to be with other people who have gone through death loss and who are having similar experiences. Support groups can provide invaluable information, support, and comfort in discovering that you truly are not alone. The Denver Hospice offers a number of groups, as do many faith communities.
- Take time to send cards or letters to people you saw during the holidays or didn't get to see during the holidays. It will help remind you that you do have connections with others that will go on throughout the rest of the year.

The holidays may have brought up feelings that you thought you were through having or ones you didn't know you had. While it may be hard to sit still with the silence and feel the discomfort, it is often in this very silence and stillness that we rediscover the true depth of our sorrow and the true depth of our love.



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