



# **THRIVING DURING THE HOLIDAYS:** *How to Prioritize Your Mental Wellbeing*



**Mental Health FIRST AID**

*from* NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

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## Why is it important to manage your mental wellbeing during the holiday season?

Holiday stress can take a toll on your mental health, leading to increased anxiety and depression and feeling overwhelmed. From the pressure of family gatherings to managing finances, it's essential to recognize how stress affects your wellbeing and take steps to care for your whole self. Identify common stressors this time of year, and use the practical tips and resources provided for budgeting, managing your time, prioritizing your physical and mental wellbeing, and creating realistic expectations.

### UNDERSTANDING HOLIDAY STRESS



**A study by the American Psychological Association** found that **38% of people** indicated the holidays caused them more stress, depression and anxiety. It's important to understand the sources of holiday stress and distinguish when you may be experiencing stress or a mental health challenge.

#### ■ **Recognize common stressors during the holidays.**

Holiday stressors often include financial pressures, unrealistic expectations, and time constraints. Identifying these common triggers can help you prepare for and mitigate their impact.

#### ■ **Differentiate between holiday stress and mental health challenges.**

It's important to distinguish between the typical stressors associated with the holiday season and potential mental health challenges like anxiety or depression. While holiday stress may stem from external factors like financial concerns or time constraints, mental health challenges are internal and can persist beyond the holiday season.

#### ■ **Identify early signs of mental health challenges.**

Be vigilant about early signs of mental health challenges like anxiety or depression, such as changes in mood, sleep patterns, or appetite. Seek help if you notice these signs in yourself or others. Holiday stressors can exacerbate existing mental health challenges or contribute to their onset, so early recognition allows for timely intervention and support.



**Download this chart to discover the symptoms of anxiety and depression.**



A good start to prioritizing your wellbeing for the holidays and year-round is by balancing the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Eight Dimensions of Wellness through self-care.

## DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS

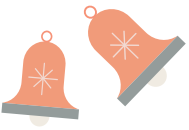
The Eight Dimensions of Wellness are part of SAMHSA's Wellness Initiative, which encourages individuals, organizations and communities to work toward longer, healthier and happier lives. Each of the dimensions can affect overall quality of life.



- **Emotional:** When a person is emotionally well, they cope effectively, have positive self-regard and create satisfying relationships.
- **Financial:** When a person experiences satisfaction with their current and future financial situation.
- **Social:** Developing a sense of connection and belonging and having a support system can help a person feel socially well.
- **Spiritual:** When a person attends to their sense of purpose and meaning in life. Spiritual wellbeing can involve a focus on the here and now rather than on the past or the future.
- **Occupational:** Personal satisfaction and enrichment with one's work and activities that provide meaning and purpose to life, such as volunteering, studying, caregiving and contributing to the community.
- **Physical:** Activity, as appropriate, healthy foods, and restful sleep all contribute to physical wellbeing.
- **Intellectual:** When a person recognizes ways to expand their knowledge and skills through intellectually stimulating activities.
- **Environmental:** Safe environments lead to environmental wellbeing. This can include accessing clean air, food and water; occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support our wellbeing; and promoting learning, contemplation and relaxation in natural places and spaces.



Explore [SAMHSA's step-by-step guide](#) for ways to balance these wellbeing dimensions and create a happier, healthier life.



## PRIORITIZING SELF-CARE

Self-care is an important way to protect your physical, mental and emotional health so you can better adapt to changes, build strong relationships and recover from setbacks. Self-care practices will refuel you, helping you take care of yourself and support those around you. Self-care needs to be actively planned rather than spontaneous. Engaging in a self-care routine has been clinically proven to:

- **Reduce or eliminate anxiety and depression.**
- **Reduce stress.**
- **Increase happiness.**
- **Help individuals adapt to changes.**
- **Help individuals build strong relationships.**
- **Help individuals recover from setbacks.**



### Tips for self-care during the holidays:

- Find time for activities and hobbies that bring you joy and relaxation, such as reading or baking.
- Use relaxation exercises such as meditation and deep breathing to help you manage stress.
- Aim for at least one relaxing activity every day, such as a short walk or 30 minutes spent unwinding, whether listening to music, reading or journaling.
- Do at least one pleasurable activity every day, such as cooking or connecting with friends or loved ones.
- Prioritize routine checkups such as medical and dental care. Regular screenings can help identify potential health issues before they become serious.
- Set boundaries, which can include creating a “no” list with things you don’t like or no longer want to do.
- Get enough sleep. Adults usually need 7-8 hours of sleep each night.
- Look for opportunities to laugh! These might come from watching your favorite TV show, reading a book, or enjoying an evening out at a comedy show.





## SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Perfection is unattainable. Instead, aim for realistic and achievable goals, whether in gift-giving, decorating or social engagements.

### ■ **Release pressure to create the “perfect” holiday.**

There is no universal definition of a perfect holiday. Everyone’s holiday season will look different, and that’s OK. Coping with societal or personal expectations can involve not comparing yourself to others, focusing on creating your own unique traditions and meaningful experiences, or nurturing your wellbeing through self-care.

### ■ **Stay present.**

Mindfulness techniques, like being present in the moment, meditating, breathing exercises, and practicing gratitude, can help you enjoy the holiday season without getting caught up in unrealistic ideals.



**Get started with a mindfulness practice: [Here are eight breathing exercises from Healthline to help you relax, stay present and centered.](#)**

## MANAGING TIME AND FINANCES

Early planning and budgeting can alleviate last-minute stress and the risk of overspending, helping you enjoy the holiday season without financial or time management worries. For effective time and financial management this time of year, consider creating:

### ■ **A holiday schedule to allocate time wisely.**

Organize your time so that you’re prioritizing activities that bring you joy and reducing obligations that may cause undue stress. Write things down in advance using a paper planner or even your phone.

### ■ **A holiday budget.**

Set a budget in advance that works for you and stick to it to avoid post-holiday financial stress. Consider using one of the several smartphone apps that can make monitoring spending habits and tracking expenses a breeze.



**Fortune has outlined a list of [10 budgeting apps](#) that can help you create and maintain a budget.**



## FOCUSING ON PHYSICAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION

### ■ **Maintain physical wellbeing during the holidays.**

Prioritize your physical health by getting adequate sleep, staying hydrated and maintaining a regular exercise routine to boost your energy levels and overall wellbeing. Aim for at least 7-8 hours of sleep each night and 6-8 glasses of water a day.

### ■ **Balance holiday treats with nutritious choices.**

Good nutrition is as important to mental health as it is to physical health. Enjoy holiday treats in moderation and maintain a balanced diet with nutritious choices to support your physical health. Try to incorporate fruits, vegetables, whole grains and protein into your meals whenever possible.

### ■ **Incorporate exercise and movement into your daily routine.**

Exercise is good for our physical and emotional health, as it increases serotonin levels and leads to improved mood and energy. Be mindful of the exercise appropriate for your own health. Incorporating regular physical activity into your daily routine, such as taking walks, doing yoga or dancing, can help you manage stress and maintain physical wellbeing.



## COPING WITH LONELINESS AND GRIEF

### ■ **Strategies for facing loneliness during the holidays.**

Researchers have said loneliness and social isolation can be as damaging to physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes daily. If you're experiencing loneliness, consider connecting with friends and support networks in person or via a phone call. Exchange friendly words with neighbors or coworkers or write holiday cards to loved ones. Volunteer opportunities and local events can also provide social interaction. Soup kitchens, animal shelters, older adult housing facilities or organizations are all excellent volunteer options this time of year.

### ■ **Coping with grief and loss during the festive season.**

We all experience loss, and learning how to process that loss is a vital component to fostering resilience and overcoming adversity. Coping with grief may involve honoring the memory of loved ones with new traditions or a private mourning ritual, seeking support from a therapist, connecting with a faith community, or finding a grief support group.

### ■ **Finding support and staying connected.**

Stay connected with people you enjoy being around, as they can offer valuable support. Often, people want to help but don't know how, so don't be afraid to tell them what you need and never underestimate the power of laughing with a close friend or loved one during times of loneliness or grief.



## EMBRACING JOY AND GRATITUDE

Find moments of joy and gratitude during the holidays by savoring the meaningful experiences of the holiday season. Focus on the positive aspects of the holidays.

### ■ **Create your own holiday traditions.**

Establishing unique holiday traditions with loved ones can create a sense of joy and togetherness, like telling stories, honoring your family's history, playing games, enjoying seasonal displays and activities, or having a sing-along



Explore **80-plus ideas from Hallmark for holiday traditions to try.**



### ■ **Practice gratitude exercises.**

Research has shown that consciously practicing gratitude can reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. Practicing gratitude is also a great protective factor, defined by MHFA curriculum as “something that decreases the chances of a person being adversely affected by a circumstance or disorder.” Incorporate gratitude exercises, such as journaling or thanking different people in your life, into your daily routine to shift your perspective toward positivity and appreciation.

## GIVING BACK

Experiencing the joy of spreading kindness and goodwill is a valuable part of the holiday season. Acts of generosity and giving back to your community or a charitable cause can be fulfilling and provide a sense of purpose during the holidays.

### **Opportunities to make a positive impact on your community:**

- Explore various volunteering opportunities, from serving at a local shelter to organizing donation drives.
- Know how to support those around you who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge. Consider getting certified in Mental Health First Aid to recognize the signs and symptoms and be prepared when a mental health challenge or crisis happens. You can #BeTheDifference in someone's recovery journey.
- Consider becoming a MHFA Instructor to support your community and train others.



Become a **Mental Health First Aider (MHFA)**

Become a **Mental Health First Aid Instructor (MHFA)**



## SEEKING SUPPORT

### ■ **Recognize the importance of seeking help when needed.**

Acknowledge that it's okay to seek help if you're struggling with your mental health during the holidays or any other time of year. Professional support can make a significant difference.



**If you or a loved one is considering professional help, this [MHFA guide](#) shares how to start the process.**

**988**

**If you or someone you know is in danger, call 911, a local mental health crisis hotline or reach out to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988, or chat [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org).**

### ■ **Know how to access mental health services during the holiday season.**

Understand how to access mental health services, whether through your insurance provider, local clinics, Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs), or online platforms, so you can get the support you need.

### ■ **Utilize resources to locate professionals and programs that can assist.**

Learn about available mental health resources, such as therapists, counselors and helplines. Knowing where to turn for help is essential. Save the following resources:



**Find a [Health Care Professional or Program \(SAMHSA\)](#)**



**Find a [Support Group or Local Program \(SAMHSA\)](#)**



**Find a [Local CCBHC \(The National Council for Mental Wellbeing\)](#)**

**Disclaimer** The tips and advice included in this toolkit are for informational purposes. We encourage you to seek professional guidance for your specific mental health needs.





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