

HOLIDAY SEASON SURVIVAL GUIDE

WELLNESS THERAPY OF SAN DIEGO

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The holiday season can be an incredibly beautiful, joyous, and magical time of the year for so many people. However, for so many other people, it is a time that can bring up difficult emotions for so many reasons. Even if this time of year is one of enjoyment for you, it can still be rife with tough to handle situations that may call for the use of extra skills.

Some of the skills in this Holiday Season Survival Guide may be of use to you for those hard moments over the next several months.



Eating During the Holiday Season



Using a moderation and compassion-based approach to eating during the holidays.

Difficulty with over or under-consumption of food is incredibly common for so many people. This is often compounded by holidays that make food a focal point. Starting as early as Halloween, food is the star of so many social events, parties, and traditions. Many people struggle with the holidays when they are using restriction of calories to lose weight (restriction in both healthy and less healthy ways can cause distress) and staying conscious of food consumption over these months can be stressful and anxiety-provoking. On the other side of the spectrum, there are many people who have difficulty with over-consumption particularly when surrounded by traditional holiday foods potentially leading to concerns with weight gain that impacts health and self-esteem.

Using a compassionate, moderation-based approach can be helpful in striking a balance between over-restriction and overeating. Rather than flat out denying yourself any candy at Halloween, pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving, or latkes during Hanukkah, you can try a couple more moderate strategies below.

- o Allow yourself a reasonable amount of your favorite holiday treat. A standard serving size is a good place to start.
- o Research shows that being very restrictive by cutting out a whole food group or denying yourself certain “bad” foods can result in an overconsumption of that off-limit food or binge eating of another food.

- o Eat a serving size or small portion of what you are craving. Eat each bite mindfully (see more on this later in the guide). Pause between each bite to think about what you've just enjoyed and why. Take each bite with intention.
- o Stop and take 10-15 minutes to let your food settle and allow your body to decide if it's satisfied. You can eat other nutritious foods if you feel hungry during this time. If after 10-15 minutes you still want more of the treat you've just had, allow yourself another, smaller serving size about ½ the size of the standard serving and repeat the above steps.
- o Treating yourself kindly and with compassion versus judging yourself for eating an off-limit food can decrease the suffering you may create for yourself.
- o If you eat a “bad” food or eat more than you had intended, try gently reminding yourself that you're only human and can make different choices in the future if that is what your values dictate.
- o If you feel overfull, non-judgmentally remind yourself to enjoy your next meal/treat more slowly and use mindfulness as you eat.
- o Keep in mind that you can both eat food for nutrition AND enjoyment. It's important to eat healthy foods to nourish your body and support good mental health. It's also just as important to remember that food can be eaten just for savoring the experience.



Go ahead and enjoy some of your holiday favorites, while recognizing that you do not have to restrict yourself everyday through the holidays to stay consistent with health goals.

Boundary Setting

The holidays can be an occasion for bringing people together to celebrate the season and each other...and family and friend relationships are complex and for many people these get togethers can be plain painful to deal with. Feeling obligated to see certain family, friends, or relatives can be incredibly stressful. As much as we may care for someone or feel compelled to attend family events over the holiday season, conflicts around personal beliefs, expectations, and past interactions can create tension and build resentment.

Maintaining strong boundaries can help you manage the upcoming holidays a bit more easily by reducing strain and perhaps even a few family arguments (aggressive and passive aggressive alike). Boundaries can be spoken or unspoken, emotional, and physical. An example of an emotional boundary would be clearly telling someone you won't talk about a particular subject with them. A physical boundary may be not spending time in a room with a person you have difficulty interacting with.

Below are a few suggestions to consider if the holidays get tough for you due to boundary crossings by others.

- o Thinking through how you may set and maintain a boundary *before* spending time at gatherings is a good place to start.
- o Be clear on how long you'll stay at a party/visit and leave when that timeframe is up **DESPITE** what's happening or who is asking you to stay (take that slice of pie to go!).
- o If someone brings up a topic that makes you uncomfortable or doesn't feel appropriate for the setting (I'm thinking of all the moms asking when you're having kids and in-laws bringing up politics) clearly, firmly, yet calmly say, "Now is not the time to talk about that." If this doesn't end the conversation, you can politely excuse yourself and leave the room.
- o Take time-outs. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, take time to walk around the block, go onto the backyard, porch or patio or even the bathroom and take a few minutes to do some deep breathing and relaxation before returning to the gathering.



- o Avoid alcohol or other mood altering substances- this can intensify emotions potentially escalating conversations/interactions in an unhelpful way. Having a drink or two may seem like a good way to help unwind, but this impairs our ability to inhibit our actions and can intensify reactions if upset.

Being clear on what activities/events you will or will not participate in, clear on what topics you will or won't engage on, and individuals that you won't share time with can aid in setting boundaries with others. From there, using some of the above techniques can help you in maintaining these boundaries.



Holiday Stress

Stressors can come up in all forms this time of year. From travel to finances to managing social obligations, it's easy to let stress take over. Below are a few tips for managing stress this season, which may be especially useful if you've experienced stress this time of year in the past.



- o Take a break. Take 10-15 minutes a day that you've set aside just to focus on relaxation. Use this time to breathe or focus on what you may need in order to recharge that day. If your schedule allows, you may practice this several times throughout the day even for 1-2 minutes.
- o Keep up with all your healthy habits. Make sure you keep getting good, regular sleep. Stick with your exercise routine, eat plenty of nourishing food, and treat any physical illnesses that arise as soon as you can. Making sure your body feels good can reduce stress for your mind.
- o Set and stick to a budget. Financial stressors this time of year are incredibly common. Think about the extra expenses that come up due to travel, time off work, buying gifts, preparing large meals, and so on. Plan a realistic budget and reduce spending where feasible to help your budget stretch farther.
- o Find one thing to be grateful for or one thing that has gone well everyday. Take a minute or two to focus on that one thing when feeling stress. Remind yourself about the value behind the things you're doing during the holiday season and see if this helps to reduce stress.
- o Plan ahead. Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, cleaning for guests. Having a plan can reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed. An extra helpful tip would be to plan with room for

problems to arise. If you think wrapping gifts may take an hour or two, double that time when planning - just in case you run into problems- to avoid last minute stress to feeling behind. If everything goes smoothly and you planned more time than needed, you've just found extra time in your day.

- o Prioritize. Keep up with traditions or attend the parties that are most important to you rather than trying to do it all. Taking time to really think about what is most important can reduce feeling overburdened.
- o Avoid drinking or other substances in excess, which can lead to increased feeling of depression or anxiety. Although you may initially feel a sense of relief, overall, substance use is known to increase depression and anxiety and is not a sustainable coping mechanism.
- o Reach out for professional help if needed. If things become too overwhelming, short-term therapy to learn stress management techniques can help. Making time to attend several sessions with an expert skilled in teaching strategies for coping with stress can be invaluable.



Mindful Eating

This time of year there are so many different holidays that people may be celebrating based on culture, religion, country of origin, or personal preferences. However, one commonality is that almost every holiday this season shares is that most are celebrated with food. And a LOT of food at that.

Regardless of health goals, taking sporadic days where you indulge isn't necessarily problematic and, in fact, is often encouraged by dietitians and is supported by research as being helpful to stay consistent with goals. However, overindulgence for some people can lead to a host of emotions that impact emotional well-being.

Being mindful while eating can help to reduce how much a person consumes while increasing their overall enjoyment of a meal. Whether you're trying to stay consistent with health goals, or you know that over-eating can lead to a shame spiral, or you just want to enjoy your holiday treats more, mindful eating may be useful for you this holiday season.

A few steps to begin to practice mindful eating:

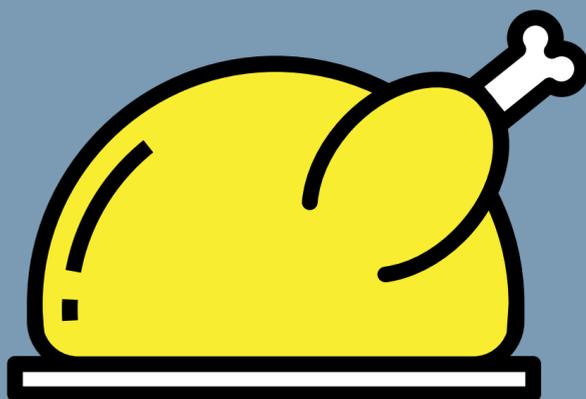


- o Be purposeful about what you eat. Food is both nourishing and meant for enjoyment. Begin by choosing the things you'd like to eat the most and that would be most satisfying. Start with those foods and reserve other, less desired foods for later.
- o If there are lots of goodies to choose from and you can't decide what you want most, take small serving sizes of each. Try taking a bite or two worth of each of the foods you want most at first. You can always get more later if you're not fully satisfied.
- o As you begin to enjoy your food, be intentional with each and every bite. Take a moment to notice how the food looks - the colors the textures. Notice how the food smells- can you identify the ingredients from that alone? Only once you have fully enjoyed your food through other senses should you take your first bite.

- o With each bite, describe to yourself how the food tastes. See if you can notice the subtle nuances of the flavors. Describe the textures of each food/each component of the food as you slowly chew. Take each bite with a sense of curiosity to discover how it tastes.
- o Between bites set down your utensil and take a moment to notice the aftertaste in your mouth or sensation of swallowing or digesting your food before very intentionally taking your next bite.
- o Stay present with your emotions and sensations. Notice and describe how you and your body feel to be aware of cues that you're becoming full, satisfied, or beginning to overeat.
- o Before getting another treat or a second helping, allow yourself 10-15 minutes. This gives your body time to send signals about being full or satisfied as eating to the point of being overfull often diminishes the enjoyment of food.

As discussed before, food is meant to not only be nourishing, but enjoyed as well. Throughout this holiday season take time to truly notice and enjoy what you're eating in a mindful way.

This may change the way you view eating and food in general as many people feel an increase in satisfaction without feeling that they are restricting themselves.

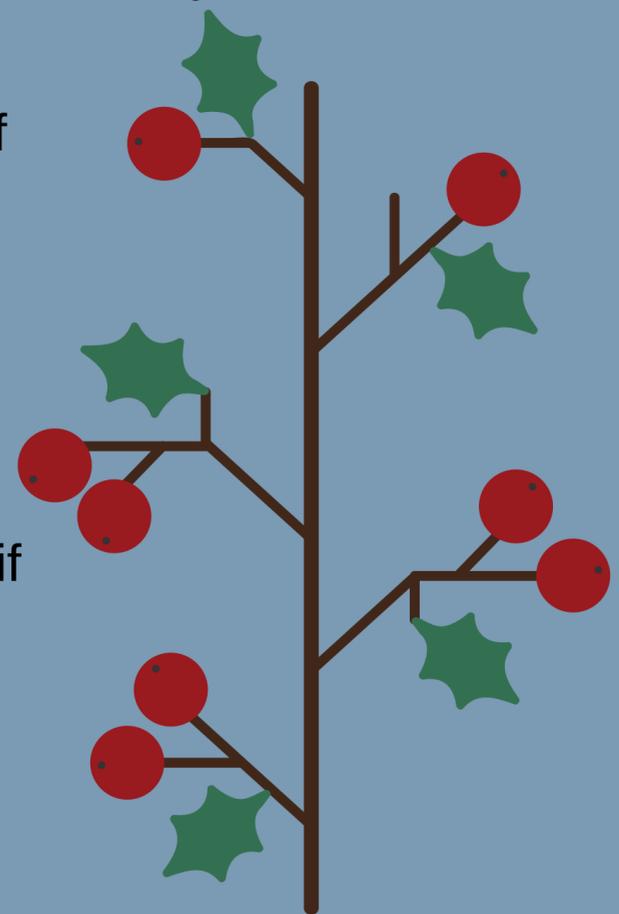


Coping With Grief

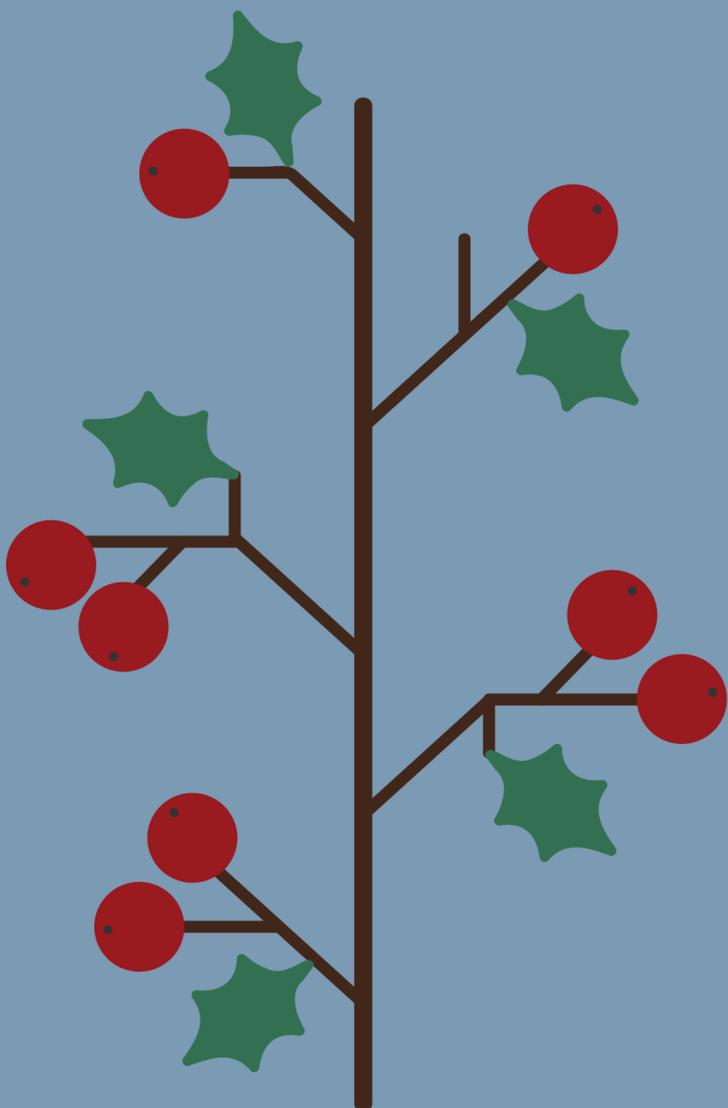
This time of year can be particularly difficult for many as it's an all too painful reminder of loss. Losses of any kind can be brought into focus during the holidays as they honor tradition and family and friends and love. Loss of loved ones, past relationships, changes that were difficult, grief about lost youth or mobility, health, finances, and time. These are just a few examples of the types of loss people experience throughout the year and when preparing for the holidays and the start of a new year, these may be on your mind more than usual.

Many people find this time of year to be fun and light, for others these months are some of the most difficult to get through. Some of the strategies below may help you if you're struggling with any kind of grief. Although grief may never fully leave you, despite how much time has passed, taking active steps to recognize and work through grief can lessen the pain or change your relationship to it, to some extent.

- o It's helpful to keep in mind that everyone grieves differently and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Nor is there a time limit for grief to resolve. Keep from judging your process or comparing yourself to others who have moved on or processed grief differently.
- o Take time to notice your feelings. Allow yourself the time and compassion to really feel what you're feeling, without judgment. Be gentle to yourself and your feelings. Set time aside several times a week or even daily if needed where you can journal about how you feel, speak with a trusted friend, or grieve in privacy if that is most comfortable for you.
- o Be very intentional about using self-care this time of year. Make extra time to do the things that keep you balanced and healthy in all aspects.



- o Talk about the person/relationship/pet/loss you've experienced with someone you trust. Talking about grief may be painful initially, but research shows this helps to process the emotions tangled up in your grief. If you don't have a trusted friend or family member a clergy member or finding a therapist could be a useful alternative. Some people even opt to use online forums with others who have experienced similar losses.
- o Celebrate the life of a loved one by creating a new tradition in their honor this year. What's one thing that person enjoyed or cared about or would make them laugh? Start a tradition that helps you remember their life and what was valuable to them this year.
- o Plan an outing, a meal, or activity for yourself and others that you know would be fun. Be as mindful as possible participating in the fun event you planned. Notice feelings of guilt or sadness that may naturally arise when doing something enjoyable for yourself when also holding space for the grief you're experiencing. Meet yourself with compassion and allow yourself to feel the pleasant feelings too.
- o Surround yourself with people and things that you love and that provide you with comfort.



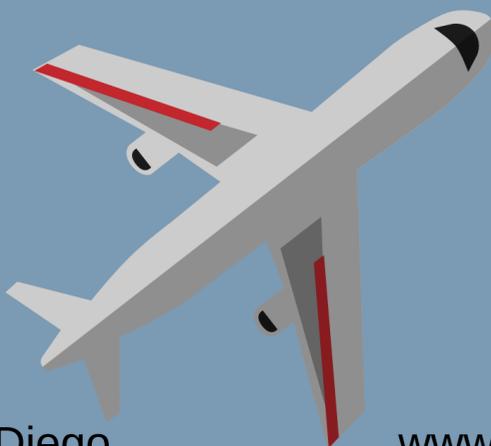
- o Think about doing something kind for others. Contributing to others is a very helpful way to not only feel valued, but to find peace in knowing you've made someone else's day a little bit better.
- o Ask for help when you need it.

Managing Holiday Travel

Travel this time of year is notoriously stressful. The number of people traveling by car and plane is exponentially higher. Weather conditions can cause flight delays and cancellations or hazardous driving conditions further increasing stress and frustration. A little preparation may help to reduce your distress if your travel gets derailed.

- o Know your triggers. What causes you to feel irritated generally? Lack of sleep? Hunger? Boredom? Plan ahead! One of my favorite things to do before travel is packing lots of snacks.
 - o Personal Tip: While I do go with some of the travel usual suspects- trail mix, dried fruit, candy- I also pack a legitimate, full meal for myself and daughters (that travels well) right in my carry on. This prevents any hunger or worry about waiting in long lines or spending outrageous amounts of money on horrible, non-nutritious airport food.
- o Expect delays and plan for them. Inevitably, holiday travel always takes longer than you plan. Rather than be taken by surprise, be prepared to stave off boredom and frustration. Download all your favorite episodes of a TV show, multiple movies, and ebooks. Bring a couple actual books, crossword puzzles, adult coloring books, magazines, knitting needles and so on in the event your devices run out of charge. If you're traveling with kids, do the above for them as well.
- o In the days leading up to your travel, take some extra time to complete anything that must be done in advance. Try not to leave all the last minute errands and packing to the night before (or day of) travel. This leads to extra stress and staying up late or waking up early before travel, which in turn sets most people up for being irritable and more susceptible to being affected by uncontrollable situations. Getting errands and tasks done in advance means that you can plan for getting a good night's sleep to help tolerate stressful travel situations.
- o Remind yourself that travel is stressful and see if you can practice some strategies to manage your stress before and during travel.

Review some of your favorite techniques and have them ready for the days you'll be traveling. It may also be helpful to keep in mind why you're traveling and what's valuable about being where you're going. This can help to offset some of the frustration or stress that you experience.



Maintaining Sobriety

The holidays are incredibly difficult for many, and can be especially trying for those who are in recovery. Not only can the stressors be more difficult to cope with, but many of the holidays celebrated during this time not only include alcohol as part of the tradition, but celebrate it too.

In a society that already treats alcohol as a necessary commodity (with cannabis quickly rising with legalization across many states), adding situations with potential to be triggering and a mindset that alcohol is necessary, relapse is high during the holiday months.

Some of these tips may be helpful in maintaining sobriety during the holidays from both alcohol and other substances.

- o Set limits and boundaries. Know what activities and events are likely to be triggering and avoid them if your sobriety may be at risk. If you are aware that a party will have lots of access to alcohol/substances or include people that make it difficult to maintain your sobriety, skip that party or event.
- o Plan for attending extra meetings/getting extra support. Whether you're part of a step program, Smart Recovery, Seeking Safety, religious-based counseling, or something else, plan to attend extra meetings during these times, meeting with your sponsor more frequently, and/or reaching out to your support group more regularly.
- o Use the strategy of playing the tape through. You may have temptations or thoughts about drinking/using *one* time or drinking/using in moderation. Take the time to play the tape to the end- what happens next from your experience? Does it really end with just one drink? Or in the past has this ended differently for you? If feeling temptation, take a few moments to think about what the real consequences of this action may be.
- o Spend time with other people who are in sobriety/choose not to drink/support your recovery. Schedule your time with this in mind and take time to plan out your holiday season to maximize support and minimize exposure to risky situations.

Setting Maintainable Resolutions

It's getting to that time of the year that people start to reflect on all that has taken place in past 12 months. You may think about all you've accomplished, goals you've achieved, and hopefully you'll spend some time thinking about how to continue to grow in the future.

I find that self-reflection and setting goals for growth is incredibly helpful and using the end of the year as a nice maker for this type of reflection can be useful. However, studies show that the vast majority of New Year's resolutions are not actually maintained after the first month or two.

There are lots of reasons why a resolution may never be put into action or why a person doesn't stay consistent with a resolution. Some of the more prevalent reasons tend to be due to unrealistic, unclear, and ill-defined resolutions. Setting resolutions that use the SMART goal format can help you think through your resolutions a bit more and be more likely to stick with them into the next year.



What are SMART goals? Let's start with the most common New Year's resolution – to get in shape- and refine it using the SMART goal guidelines.

S- SPECIFIC. Getting into shape is a very non-specific goal. How do you know when you've gotten there? What does being in shape actually mean? Taking a moment to actually define what it is that you actually want to do can help. A more specific goal in this same vein would be to lose weight.

M- MEASURABLE. So now we have a specific goal – to lose weight. But it's not yet measurable. You need to define how much weight you would like to lose so you know when you've achieved this goal. A better way to state this goal would be: I want to lose 5 pounds.

A- ATTAINABLE. This is a big one that many people forget to consider. Is my goal actually attainable? If your goal is to lose 5 pounds and you're underweight already or have a health condition that prevents you from losing weight, this may not be a realistic goal for you. If you set a goal that is unattainable and then don't meet that goal, it tends to decrease motivation to try again in the future. Take a moment to check-in with yourself and see if you need to adjust your goal to make it attainable.

R- RELEVANT. Is your goal relevant to your life? Does it serve a purpose and fit with your values? If not, there's no motivation to keep working at a goal. If your goal is to lose 5 pounds to help reduce joint pain, due to high blood pressure, or cholesterol this is a relevant goal that would better your health. This may help you remain motivated when trying to work toward your goal.

T- TIME BOUND. This is another important, but frequently missed, step. By what time point do you want this goal to be achieved? If you want to lose 5 pounds by next December, the actions you need to take look drastically different than losing 5 pounds by next month (at which point I would encourage you to go back to A and evaluate how attainable that goal may be). Setting a realistic timeframe increases likelihood of success.

After going through the SMART steps, the vague goal of "getting in shape" is now "I'd like to lose 5 pounds to better my health by March of the coming year." This helps you to better plan the actions you would need to take to meet this goal and helps you know when you've accomplished it.

