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Surviving holidays amid pandemic

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For many people, the winter holidays are fun, warm and spiritually uplifting. But for many others, holiday celebrations are an emotional mixed bag — happy reunions with family and friends on the one hand and disappointments on the other.

This year many older adults will experience additional emotional struggles because of the pandemic — especially loneliness for those who are sheltering-in-place and are socially isolated, and heightened family tensions for those who are essentially locked in with family.

Merely getting together will be exceedingly difficult for those who take the need for social distancing seriously. Recently, public health researchers are advising us that even getting together in small groups can be risky.

Here are a few thoughts to help deal with the winter holiday gatherings this year:

Make a decision in advance whether you and your loved ones can have in-person gatherings or must instead meet virtually. If in-person, follow basic safety ground-rules for safe interaction. Hopefully, this will not be a matter of disagreement within your family.

If you choose video conference, keep in mind that, unlike typical holiday tables, not everyone can talk at once. So, try to create a structure that will involve everyone.

Also keep in mind that it is very difficult to have separate conversations on video conference. This limits the common safety valve of getting away from

the people who distress you and spending time with people you enjoy most. Plan separate conversations with these people.

Unless your social style as a group is enjoyably argumentative, try to set aside differences. Focus on what you share rather than on what divides you. This may not be easy during this historical moment of great political anger.

Also, try to accept family and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Remember that Uncle Joe will probably repeat the embarrassing things he said last year. And your children will probably still not be exactly who you want them to be.

When you feel a surge of disappointment or anger, take a deep breath and bite your tongue. Open expression of these kinds of feelings generally just makes things worse.

Keep in mind that the holidays do not have to be perfect. Good enough is, well, good enough. And for that matter, terrible blunders — like a dropped turkey — sometimes make the best family memories.

Try to anticipate, and have a plan for how to deal with, emotionally difficult situations.

Avoid excessive alcohol consumption. Try not to use getting high to deal with difficult emotions or to help you relax and have a good time. Binge drinking, with its inevitable hangovers, is not a good idea.

If you feel down or stressed out more than usual, have more difficulty sleeping, or don't find pleasure in anything or anyone, seek help. Talking with a good friend, your doctor or a mental health professional may be in order.

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal or experiencing a psychiatric crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK, the national suicide prevention lifeline.

Yes, this is a difficult year — all the more reason to renew bonds and create a sense of shared meaning. We will come through it!

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