

MANAGING THE STRESS OF HOLIDAY GATHERINGS DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered society's approach to social interactions and become a source of conflict for some families and communities around how to approach holiday gatherings.

Social gatherings can be joyful, but may also lead to conflict. Considering in advance ways to respond can reduce stress.

Considering what is most important to your family and planning in advance for how to address challenging situations can help lower stress and make gatherings more enjoyable.

Self-Care Principles

The pandemic has been challenging for many people over a long period of time. Making decisions that help your family feel safe can lower stress, even if they are hard for some people to accept.

- **Feeling concern is understandable, even if others do not.** You may not feel cheerful or in the “holiday spirit.” Holidays can be stressful, more so during the pandemic.
- **Lower expectations.** How a gathering takes place may not be how you have done it in the past, but if you feel safe, you are better able to enjoy and participate.
- **Determine your priorities.** Being in person with friends and relatives? Feeling the most safe and healthy? Knowing the answer will help in making decisions.
- **Give yourself a break.** The situation and options may not feel ideal, however, do the best you can in this challenging situation.
- **Self care is important.** Being aware of troubling feelings and finding ways to deal with stress protects your health. It also sets an example for children and others about how to manage difficult situations.

Managing Conflict

Social gatherings can be joyful, but may also lead to conflict. Considering in advance ways to respond can reduce stress.

- **Anticipate relationship challenges.** Consider people and issues most likely to cause conflict.
- **Find the words.** Think about and maybe write down how you might respond to uncomfortable topics. If you're unsure how to respond, ask a trusted friend.

- **Think about engaging in arguments.** Sometimes it is better to be present than to be right.
- **Listen for the real message.** When high stress conversations occur, listen for the real meaning. For instance, comments about vaccines, masks, or elections may really be about a person wanting to feel safe and believe the world is a just and fair place. These are values most people agree on.
- **Find common ground.** Consider topics for which there is mutual interest or agreement, and remember there is generally more that unites people than separates them.
- **Remember the difficulties many people are having, especially during the holidays.** The pandemic is still causing uncertainty, which contributes to stress. An empathic response (e.g., “It's certainly been very difficult to live with this uncertainty”) leaves people feeling understood and reduces conflict.
- **Focus on shared values.** During conflict, finding ways to connect rather than “winning” lowers stress. This helps people feel more calm and connected.
- **Know what you control.** You cannot control what other people say or do, but you can control how you respond to it.
- **Consider your limitations and how to care for yourself.** Remember these options if things aren't working out:
 - » Change the subject.
 - » Take a break from talking.
 - » Talk with someone else.
 - » Step outside or go for a walk.
 - » Have an exit plan.