

Seven tips for managing your mental health during the holidays

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The holidays can be a time for joy and connecting with friends and loved ones, but they can also bring stress and sadness. Angela Drake is a clinical neuropsychologist at UC Davis Health. She has practical advice

for navigating the season's emotional challenges and specific tips for taking care of your mental health.

1. Manage holiday expectations

The most common advice Drake gives her patients is to figure out how to manage their expectations. "Often what we are experiencing is a disconnect between our actual situation and what we think it should be," Drake says. During the [holidays](#), this can be particularly acute. If someone grew up with a big family, they might feel a sense of loss with a small gathering. "They are mentally comparing the two without even knowing it," Drake notes. She suggests focusing on what you are grateful for in the present.

2. Let go of the fantasy

She also encourages people to manage their expectations of other people. "We can all have the fantasy that everyone is going to have a wonderful time, but the reality is that there are often tensions in families," Drake says. "It likely won't be a fantasy version of the holidays." She says you can set your expectations by recognizing certain family members may always be difficult. "You can't control other people, but you can adjust your expectations and reactions, which can be empowering."

3. Check in with yourself

One way to manage your reactions is to check in with yourself regularly. "It is a way to monitor your [emotional state](#) and see how you are doing. You can think of it as a stress, anxiety or mood scale. You rank what you are feeling from one to ten," Drake suggests. "And when you are at a certain level—whatever you decide—you take a break." She suggests doing something you enjoy and find relaxing. She encourages patients to

listen to music, exercise, do deep breathing (see tip #5), or do whatever activity or hobby they enjoy. The idea is to develop [self-awareness](#) so people can engage in self-care before reaching an emotional breaking (or boiling) point.

4. Have a plan

In addition to regular self-monitoring, Drake suggests having a specific plan for what you will do if you feel stressed out, sad, or anxious during the holidays. It could be calling a friend, walking, turning on music, reading, or watching your favorite TV show. The activity is as individual as you are. "All of this is moving towards wellness," Drake says. "It's about being proactive and engaging in [self-care](#), rather than trying to ignore or stuff down emotions, which typically only works so long."

5. Breathe

Drake uses a technique called diaphragmatic breathing to relieve stress and anxiety. It is also known as deep breathing or belly breathing. "You can do deep breathing anywhere, and it doesn't cost anything," Drake says. She notes that people often "go, go go" during the holidays and will try to power through whatever they need to do. "But then it leaves them exhausted," Drake adds. "Deep [breathing](#), holding oxygen in your lungs, allows better oxygen exchange. Your blood oxygen goes up. And as soon as that happens, you start to relax."

You can learn [deep breathing](#) from free online instructions and videos.

6. Share the happy memories

In addition to stress, the holidays can also be a time of grief as people are aware of loved ones who have passed away. "You don't want to

submerge yourself in grief, but it is not useful to just ignore it because you are still going to feel it," Drake says. A strategy she recommends is known as reminiscence therapy. "The idea is to acknowledge loss and grief but not dwell on the sad memories. Just focus on the happy memories," Drake observes. "I encourage people to celebrate that person. Talk about them, reminisce, tell stories."

7. Connect with community

"Loneliness has [negative health effects](#). The holidays can amplify loneliness, especially when people no longer have family or live far away from their families or friends," Drake says. For people who do not have a network of friends or a support group, her advice is to get out there and find one. She notes that people find community through many avenues, including churches, clubs, meetups, volunteering, cultural centers, LGBTQ centers, and many others. "Finding community is hard these days, but it is so important. You talk to people, interact, and get to feel good about what you are doing. And it is good for you."

Help is available by dialing or texting 988

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, help can be reached 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by dialing or texting 988 from a smartphone. You can learn more about the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline on their [website](#).

Provided by UC Davis

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