

Tips for Handling the Holidays

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Mental health
& COVID-19
HOT
TOPICS

TIPS FOR HANDLING THE HOLIDAYS

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Disclosures

- None

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Christmas 2020:
the same but different!



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Why are the holidays so difficult?

- Gift giving and financial stressors
- Family drama
- Drugs and alcohol
- Painful memories and losses
- Weather and crowds
- Social obligations
- Additional COVID-19

NORMALIZE and VALIDATE

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Resilience

“The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress ... As much as resilience involves "bouncing back" from these difficult experiences, it can also involve profound personal growth.”

American Psychological Association, accessed at <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>

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Psychological factors linked to resilience

- Active coping - “behavioural and/or psychological strategies to change the qualities of the stressor, the stressor itself, or how the stressor is perceived”
- Optimism/positive thinking
- Cognitive reappraisal - seeing the silver lining
- Social support
- Humour
- Physical Activity
- Prosocial behaviour/altruism
- Mindfulness
- Moral compass/purpose in life

Wu, G., Feder, A., Cohen, H., Kim, J.J., Calderon, S., Charney, D.S., & Mathe, A.A. (2013). Understanding resilience. *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 7(10), 1-15.

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Be Proactive

- Start planning now!
- Initiate a conversation with your families about what holiday plans might look like
- Think about your own expectations and levels of comfort, in light of COVID-19.
Clarify what your loved ones' expectations and comfort levels are
- Don't skip Christmas or the holidays if you normally celebrate
- For patients with little ones, establishing some normalcy and predictability is very important

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What are you doing for the holidays?

1. Brainstorm a list of options
2. Write down the pros and cons of each
3. Identify the pros/cons that carry the most weight
4. Choose an option
 - HINT: You can get creative! Sometimes a compromise between the options can best meet your needs

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Come up with a **COPING PLAN**

- Proactively anticipating “worst case scenarios” and brainstorming ideas for handling these situations. Consider covering:
 - Dealing with difficult people - low and slow, minimize interaction, find an ally, canned statements
 - Loneliness/isolation
 - Setting limits and boundaries (with yourself and others)
 - Dealing with triggers (e.g., for trauma, grief, addictions)
 - Managing gift giving and finances
 - Healthy food, alcohol, and other substance consumption
 - Self-care, including physical activity for stress management
 - Fun
 - Suicide safety planning

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Combat isolation and loneliness this COVID-19 Christmas

- Using Zoom or other technology to connect with loved ones (e.g. virtual dinner, game night, or karaoke)
- Planning outdoor activities (e.g., snow shoeing, cross country skiing, ice skating, building a snowman, a fire pit, tobogganing, viewing Christmas lights, Zoo Lights)
- Using humour (e.g. COVID-19 Christmas bingo, have a wacky Christmas face mask competition, best-looking dessert contest)
- A distanced potluck
- A short doorstep visit
- May be especially difficult for elderly - explain that you are not visiting them because you care

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An opportunity to practice assertiveness

- Think about your comfort level and expectations for safety measures in advance of a gathering and discuss this with the host or your guests
- Avoid getting pressured into anything. It's okay to say no to plans if you feel uncomfortable
- You're allowed to change your mind or cancel plans
- It's okay to wear a mask or politely ask others to take a step back if they are too close to you

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COVID-19 Christmas with children

- Uncertainty is scary for children
- Establish as much normalcy as possible
- Explain that Christmas will be different this year and start brainstorming ways to make it a special year to remember
- Discuss family traditions and creative ways to safely adjust them; focus on the values, meaning, and ideas behind the tradition and try to engage in alternative activities that maintain that spirit

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Holiday Activities in Calgary

- Tourism Calgary put together a list of Christmas activities that are happening in the city this year: <https://www.visitcalgary.com/things-to-do/stories-from-calgary/christmas-in-calgary-2020>
- Lighten Up Calgary - listing of the best neighbourhood Christmas light displays in Calgary: <https://lightenupcalgary.ca/>

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Sample Coping Plan - Step 1: Anticipate the Obstacles

Distressing Situation	Coping Strategy
Mom criticizes me	Remind myself that this is more about her issues than mine. Distract myself by playing with my niece. Remind myself that I just have to get through today - I can handle it because I've handled hard things before.
Lonely and sad - Christmas is all messed up because of COVID-19	Talk to my family about ideas. Maybe we can try snowshoeing! Remind myself that one of the most stressful parts of Christmas is usually crowds and family drama - I get to avoid both this year!
Relatives ask me about work – I was laid off and I don't want to talk about it	Give a vague answer, change the topic, and ask them about themselves. If they keep persisting, politely tell them that I'd rather not talk about it.

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Sample Coping Plan - Step 2: Brainstorm ideas for self-soothing

Activities I can do to calm myself and bring myself back to the present moment

- Going for a walk with the dog
- Treating myself to a Starbucks and noticing all my senses as I drink it
- Snuggling in a fuzzy blanket and watching my favourite movie
- Taking a hot bath with some nice smelling bath salts
- Listening to relaxing music
- Playing with my kids
- Baking

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Sample Coping Plan - Step 3: Emergency Plan

If I feel at high risk for hurting myself, I will do the following:

1. Try self-soothing strategies. Talk it out with a supportive loved one or contact a therapist if I have one. Consider booking a single session phone appointment at Eastside Family Centre.
2. If I'm still feeling unsafe, call the Distress Centre (**403-266-4357**).
3. If I'm feeling very unsafe, I will take myself to the hospital or call an ambulance.

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Positivity, optimism, and the silver lining

- Reflect on personal and/or family strengths that will get you through
- Silver linings
 - An opportunity to slow down, rest, and be present
 - Avoiding family drama, crowds, and pressure to meet expectations
 - An opportunity to explore new traditions or holiday activities
 - An opportunity to be creative, to think outside the box
 - A chance to do something you've always wanted to do on the holidays
- Focus on giving back to others
 - Volunteering, helping a neighbour or a senior, supporting local businesses

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Gratitude Activity
Gratitude journal or jar to
mark the New Year

Let's do this, 2021!



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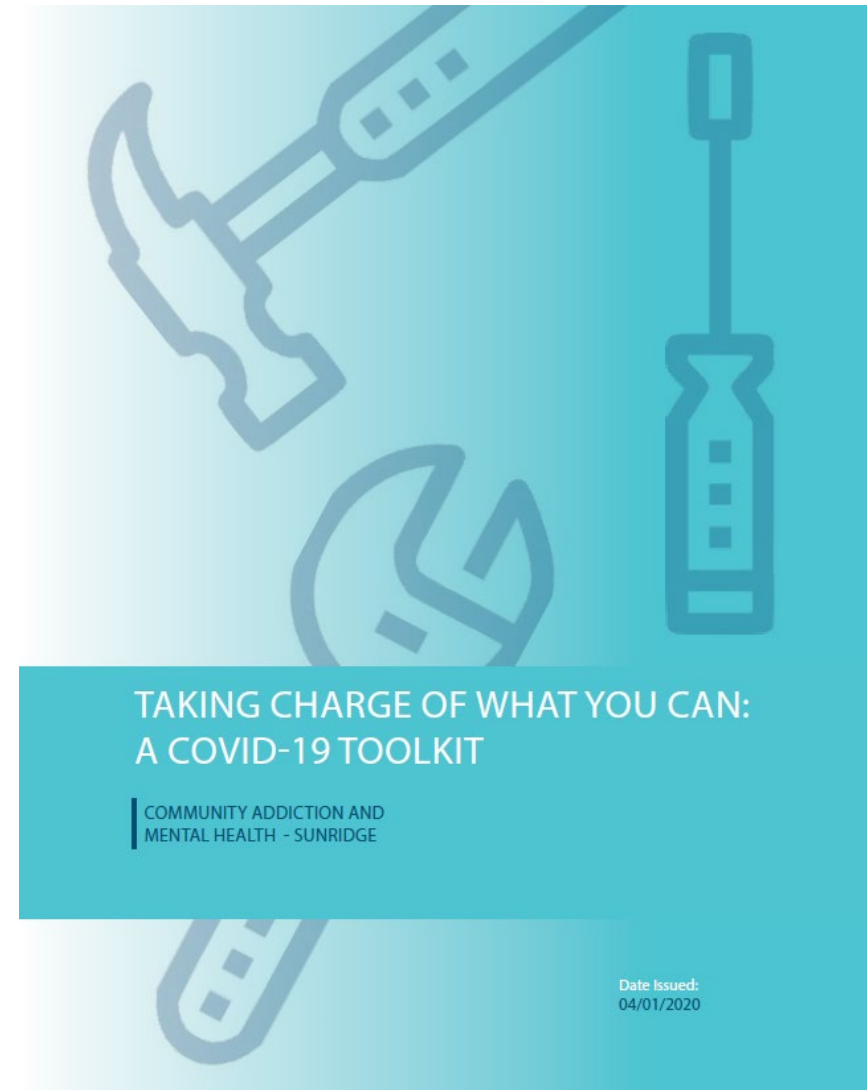
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Taking Charge of What you Can: A COVID-19 Toolkit

Specific coping skills, including relaxation, emotion regulation skills, and behavioural activation

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-mental-health-toolkit.pdf>



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Stay Informed

- Educate your patients on current AHS COVID-19 restrictions and recommendations
- Encourage patients to keep up to date on current restrictions on the AHS website
- Explain to patients what a cohort is
 - AHS Guidance for Cohorts: <https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-relaunch-guidance-cohorts.pdf>

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Government guidance on holiday gatherings

- AHS - Advice for Safe Holiday Entertaining

<https://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/covid-19-relaunch-guidance-safe-holiday-entertaining.pdf>

- B.C. Centre for Disease Control - Safer Celebrations and Ceremonies

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/social-interactions/safer-celebrations-and-ceremonies>

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Suggestions for safer holiday gatherings

- Keep gatherings as small as possible and as short as possible (e.g., just dessert)
- Ensure there is enough space for physical distancing, with higher ceilings and good ventilation (consider keeping windows open)
- Limit contacts in the 2 weeks prior to plans
- Have hand sanitizer, soap, and sanitizing wipes readily available; ask guests to clean or sanitize hands before the meal and before and after gift giving and receiving
- Plan ahead to avoid last minute shopping at peak times
- Use separate seating areas for separate cohorts
- Have one person plate everyone's meals and do not offer buffet-style meals

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Helpful CBC article

Does this mean Christmas is cancelled? Your COVID-19 questions answered.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid-19-christmas-cancelled-ask-1.5808826>

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