



Help for the Holidays

Psychological Tools for Clients
Who Struggle During the
Holiday Season

BETWEEN  SESSIONS
THERAPEUTIC TOOLS FOR GROWTH AND CHANGE

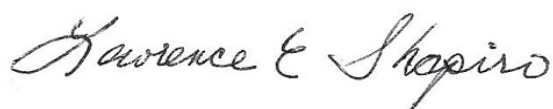
Dear Colleague,

We are honored to help you in your important work throughout the year. We continuously hear that our worksheets help clients on their journey to conquering both big and small problems and most importantly, they motivate clients to work “between sessions.”

This workbook is a special “gift” for you to use with your clients this holiday season. There are 15 worksheets that are designed to help people with many types of problems experienced during the holidays, from loneliness and depression to the almost inevitable family conflicts.

Thank you for being part of the Between Sessions Resources community. We look forward to working with you in the New Year, providing more unique and effective tools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lawrence E. Shapiro".

Lawrence E. Shapiro, Ph.D.

President, Between Sessions Resources

BETWEEN  **SESSIONS**
THERAPEUTIC TOOLS FOR GROWTH AND CHANGE

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Creating A Better Holiday

What to Know

Many people look at the holiday season as a time they hope will pass quickly. But holidays can be fun and productive just like any other day when you plan activities that are meaningful to you. Whether you look at a holiday as a long stretch of lonely hours or as a day filled with stressful activities, you can plan activities for yourself that will make every holiday a day to look forward to rather than dread. Begin by writing down activities that will make your holiday meaningful. Write down an activity that:

expresses your values: _____

always makes you smile: _____

relaxes you: _____

connects you with people you care about: _____

makes you think: _____

you enjoy but never have time for: _____

brings back wonderful memories: _____

makes you feel connected to a higher power: _____

is always fun: _____

Write down other meaningful activities: _____

What to Do

On the chart below, fill in the time slots where you have scheduled obligations. If you find you have too many “unpleasant” obligations, consider whether you really must do these things and if you can make these tasks a little more pleasant. Then, schedule at least two or three meaningful activities. Choose activities you are sure you can do and write them in the appropriate time slots. If possible, schedule one meaningful activity at the start of the day and another at the end of the day. Make a commitment to yourself to make this holiday, and every day of your life, as personally fulfilling as possible. Do this activity for at least a week. Make copies of the following page.

7 am	
8 am	
9 am	
10 am	
11 am	
Noon	
1 pm	
2 pm	
3 pm	
4 pm	
5 pm	
6 pm	
7 pm	
8 pm	
9 pm	
10 pm	
11 pm	

Did you find this activity helpful? Why or why not?

Were you able to make the “unpleasant” tasks a little more pleasant? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

How motivated are you to create a better holiday? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

Avoiding Holiday Burnout

What to Know

For people who enter the holiday season stressed out from their busy and overscheduled lives, the holidays can feel overwhelming. Added demands might diminish your holiday spirit, leading to burnout. Signs of burnout include:

- reduced performance and productivity
- anxiety
- detachment
- feeling listless
- low mood
- difficulty concentrating
- lack of creativity
- fatigue
- excessive use of substances, including alcohol, drugs, or prescription medicine
- physical and mental overwhelm
- moodiness and irritability
- inability to make decisions
- low motivation.
- withdrawal from support systems
- hopelessness

Sufferers of “holiday burnout” are often stressed by the perceived additional demands and expectations associated with preparation for, and celebration of, the holidays. Some cases of holiday burnout are likely related to depression, which can peak during the holidays. Others report feeling burned out simply because they have taken on too many responsibilities. Overscheduling combined with the demands of entertaining, shopping, decorating, and other holiday traditions can lead to overwhelm in even the most organized person. In addition, interpersonal conflicts surface during the holidays because of individual differences in expectations and increased stress levels.

Here are some suggestions to avoid holiday burnout.

1. Prioritize. You may not be able to do everything you wish during the holidays, so identify what is most important to you. Let go of the rest. Spend 15-20 minutes making a list of what you would like to do, then pare it down to what is most meaningful. Know what you want to invest your time and effort into this holiday season, then say “no” to opportunities and invitations that do not line up with your priorities.

2. Pace yourself. Holiday sales might tempt you to shop but be sure to pace yourself. The most stressful thing you can do is wait until the last minute to get all your shopping done. Try to shop early to avoid parking problems, waiting in long lines, and the overall rushed feeling that comes with last-minute shopping.

3. Shop online. If crowds stress you out, avoid them. Get on your electronic device in the comfort of your home to search for gifts. You can shop any time, day or night, and you will avoid the crowds, lines, and parking. Plus, with free shipping, it can sometimes cost less to shop online.

4. Avoid overcommitting yourself. Commit to attend some social events, instead of pushing yourself to attend all of them. Schedule time for yourself to relax by blocking out down time in your calendar or planner.

5. Delegate. Some high achievers do not delegate enough. They often do things better and faster than others, so they become chronic do-it-yourselfers. But doing this puts you at risk for burnout. For example, if you know a specific gift you want to get and you know a loved one will be near that store, ask them to pick it up for you. If you are hosting a holiday party, ask for help from family members. This gives you more time to prepare what you need to at home, without rushing around and dealing with crowds.

6. Be realistic. If you are a high achiever, you might also be a perfectionist. When you expect perfection during the holidays, you add unnecessary stress and fatigue. If you are hosting a party, why not make it a potluck? Try to keep things simple.

7. Get enough rest. You will not feel energized to complete all the tasks in front of you if you are tired. So, avoid sacrificing sleep. While you may have more on your to-do list than usual, rest should be at the top of the list. Sleep is restorative, and your body repairs itself from the damage of stress, physical strain, infection, and pollutants. Consider:

- maintaining a consistent sleep-wake schedule.
- exercising every day.
- avoiding naps close to bedtime.
- avoiding electronics, alcohol, and large meals before bedtime.
- sleeping in a dark, quiet, cool, and comfortable environment.

8. Give yourself permission. Allow yourself to feel what you feel and make the best choices for you. Do not judge or compare your feelings or choices with anyone else. You have the right to identify things that are important for you – and how you will make the holidays enjoyable and meaningful.

Burnout during the holiday season is common, but you do not have to suffer. You can avoid burnout by setting realistic expectations, starting early on holiday tasks, taking time to rest and recharge, and maintaining boundaries. If you give yourself time to rejuvenate, you will be ready to take on the challenges of the upcoming new year with renewed energy.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Remember to delegate! Write down the names of loved ones and specific tasks they can do for you.

Do you have unrealistic expectations of the holiday season? Explain.

Do you get enough rest? Do you typically find yourself exhausted during the holidays because you are sacrificing your sleep? Why? Explain.

What can you do to ensure you get enough rest this holiday season?

What are some ways you can make the holidays enjoyable and meaningful for you? Be specific.

What else can you do to avoid burnout? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

How motivated are you to avoid burnout? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

Coping with Spending the Holidays Alone

What to Know

The holidays are often viewed as a season of togetherness and joy, but this is not the case for everyone. If you are spending the holidays alone this year, you are not alone! Many people spend the holidays solo, and there is nothing wrong with being alone at this time of year. It can even be enjoyable when it is your choice. But if you want to be surrounded by loved ones, it can feel very lonely. If you dread the holiday season, take some extra steps to look after your mental health. These suggestions can make navigating the holidays easier for you.

1. Reframe your expectations. You may see images of the “ideal” holiday season on television or social media. You may feel you cannot measure up if you spend the holidays alone. Yet not all cultures have family gatherings, gift-giving, and similar rituals. There are other ways to celebrate, and when you view the holidays from a different perspective, it may help you release some of the pressure. Reassess your expectations for how the season will go—instead of how you think it should go. If you are going through a difficult time, you might view the holidays as a few days you can take care of yourself. If you are at a distance from loved ones, you could see it as the year you “did something different” and immerse yourself in local traditions and events.

2. Give thanks. There are many benefits to establishing a regular gratitude practice. Expressing gratitude can help you appreciate what you have, focus on the positives, and see the good in others. Recent research suggests that practicing gratitude can improve your overall health and wellness, as well as reduce feelings of loneliness. Use a gratitude journal to write down all the things you are grateful for—even basic everyday things.

3. Share your time. Supporting a cause is a great way to give back, particularly during the holidays. The season is filled with opportunities to help those in need, including:

- participating in a gift drive.
- providing holiday meals for the local homeless population.
- volunteering at a local animal shelter.
- donating clothing or food.
- visiting an assisted living home or sending residents holiday cards.

Research indicates that volunteering has a positive effect on overall health and creates a sense of connection to others. Check out charity or nonprofit websites to review their volunteer needs.

4. Get creative. You may want to decorate, bake, do holiday-themed arts and crafts, or use your imagination to create new traditions for yourself, including activities such as:

- baking cookies for a house-bound neighbor.
- establishing an annual holiday movie date (with yourself or with others).
- completing a holiday-themed puzzle.

5. Connect with others. Self-isolating can contribute to loneliness, which research suggests may negatively affect your overall health. Reaching out to others can help you regain a sense of connection. You might plan to:

- call an old friend.
- arrange a virtual game or cooking night with loved ones who live far away.
- introduce yourself to a new neighbor.
- chat with a shop clerk.
- organize a Zoom family gathering.
- attend a local event.

6. Set a goal. Setting goals, creating a plan, and organizing a schedule for what you want to do can take your focus off being alone. Once you have a goal in mind, plan the steps you will need to take to reach it and add them to your calendar to keep yourself accountable.

7. Tackle end-of-year projects. Spend your time getting organized for the new year. Schedule doctor's appointments, create a budget, clean out your closet, organize a junk drawer, or clean out your car. Isolate anything in your life that makes you feel overwhelmed and do something about it. You will feel a sense of accomplishment when it is done.

8. Treat yourself. The holidays often represent a season of giving, but you can treat yourself. This might mean buying an item you have wanted for a while, visiting a place you have not had time to visit, indulging in your favorite dessert, or just taking time for yourself. Whatever you choose, treating yourself can boost your mood.

9. Seek help. Even if you follow these suggestions, you still may find it challenging to be alone during the holidays. If your feelings of sadness or loneliness increase or persist, you might consider speaking with a mental health professional. Chronic loneliness is often associated with anxiety and depression. A mental health professional can recommend resources and strategies to help you cope. Here are some online resources:

- GriefShare's [support groups](#)
- Volunteer Match's [local volunteer opportunities](#)
- [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) 800-662-4357 (treatment referrals and information about mental health conditions)
- If you are in a crisis, call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 800-273-8255 or text HOME to the [Crisis Text Line](#) at 741741

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Can you reframe your expectations about the holiday season? Why or why not?

What if this is an opportunity to experience something new and different? How will you approach the season as an adventure?

What can you do to practice gratitude and express appreciation? Be specific.

Are you interested in volunteering or supporting a charity? If so, write down some ideas of what you can do.

What are some ways you can tap into your creativity?

What can you do to connect with others?

Write down one thing you want to achieve this season. It can be something small, like perfecting a recipe, or something big, like organizing holiday care packages for families in need.

Plan the steps you will need to take to reach this goal.

Did you add the steps to your calendar? Yes No

Describe end-of-year-projects or activities you would like to accomplish. Write them down, along with the date you would like to complete them by.

What is one way you can treat yourself? When will you do it?

Next, record what you do to cope with spending the holidays alone. Use the following chart to note the date and what you did. After completing the activity, rate your loneliness from 1-10, where 1 = I don't feel lonely at all, to 10 = my loneliness is unbearable. Finally, describe what happened or how you felt after completing the activity.

Date	Activity	Rate your loneliness (1-10)	Outcome

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

What else can you do to cope with being alone during the holiday season? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
 (1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

Do You Try Too Hard to Please Others During the Holidays?

What to Know

For many people the holiday season is busy and stressful. Holiday parties, gift exchanges, family gatherings, celebratory social events, and decorations all contribute to the hustle and bustle of this time of year. You might travel to see family members, attend multiple holiday gatherings, and go out of your way to make everyone around you happy. But managing expectations and taking care of everyone else's needs can be depleting, and soon enough all the stress of pleasing others will take a toll on your wellbeing.

If you tend to be a people pleaser throughout the year, the holiday season might heighten your stress, anxiety, worry, or depression. So, what can you do to manage your need to please others during the holiday season?

1. Understand it is a problem. Perhaps you believe it is easier to accommodate others rather than deal with the consequences. While it is important to be flexible, excessive people-pleasing is a habit that can impact your mental health. Always putting the needs of others before your own can lead to:

- excess stress
- depression
- resentment
- passive-aggressive behavior
- anger
- exhaustion
- dreading the holidays
- over- or undereating
- neglecting self-care
- frustration about being taken advantage of

2. Realize the effects on relationships. Perhaps you believe your people-pleasing helps relationships because it reduces conflict, but you are actually creating a wedge between you and your loved ones because true connection cannot occur if you hide your feelings.

3. Take responsibility for your happiness. You cannot control whether someone else is happy. Accept that no matter what you do (or choose *not* to do), you are only responsible for your own happiness, so avoid concerning yourself with what others think.

4. Consider what you are sacrificing. Saying “no” can be difficult but consider what you are sacrificing every time you say “yes” to please others.

5. Delay your response. Instead of immediately saying “yes” to a request, make your default response, “let me get back to you.” Take time to decide so you can consider the pros and cons of the request.

6. Help the other person feel understood. Sometimes it can be difficult to say “no,” so you can soften your response so the other person feels understood. Tip: sometimes it is best to be vague; you might say, “I understand cookie decorating is a lot of work, but I’m not available this weekend to help out.”

7. Avoid giving to earn approval. Perhaps you tend to give too much because you are seeking others’ approval. But giving should not come at the expense of your own wellbeing. Before you give gifts, your time, or money, ask yourself:

- Do I truly want to give?
- Do I have the time or resources to give?
- Can I give without harming myself?
- Will it bring me enjoyment to give?
- What am I expecting in return?

8. Avoid overhelping. You might help too much or offer help without being asked. Pause before you volunteer to help, and ask yourself, did they ask? If so, run through some of the above questions to determine if helping will work for you.

9. No need to apologize! People pleasing involves a readiness to take on blame – even if what happened has nothing to do with you. Be aware of how many times you say “sorry” at a holiday gathering or event. Practice refraining from apologizing unless you are 100% certain you need to say “sorry.”

10. Sit with your discomfort. If someone is angry with you, you might believe you have failed. You might rush to do whatever you think will make them happy. Instead, sit with the discomfort you experience when someone is upset. Breathe. Do not rush to apologize, fix the problem, or volunteer to help. Trust they can deal with their upset without your input.

11. Avoid the temptation to overschedule yourself. Instead, prioritize and block out time to do things you enjoy. After taking care of responsibilities (such as work, household tasks, childcare, and family festivities), what time is left for you? Have you made time to relax, exercise, enjoy hobbies, or participate in holiday activities you love?

What to Do

Is people-pleasing a problem for you? Explain.

Mentally prepare for the holidays by identifying potential triggers to people-please that may cause stress, anxiety, or discomfort during this time of year. Write them down.

Referring to the eleven suggestions above, write down potential solutions for dealing with family members. Keep these tactics firmly in mind so you avoid falling into old habits.

How much pressure do you feel from others who push you to do something that does not support your wellbeing? A little or a lot? Describe.

Prepare for these situations by having a conversation with yourself in the mirror to practice talking to them.

Use the chart below to record what you do to manage people-pleasing throughout the holiday season. Write down the date, what you did, how you felt afterwards, and was involved.

Date	What did you do?	Who was involved?	How did you feel after?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you while completing this activity? Explain.

Did this activity help you manage your people-pleasing tendencies? _____

Why or why not? _____

What else can you do to reduce your need to please others?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Coping with Difficult Days After a Loss

What to Know

After the initial shock of a significant loss and the first flood of support ebbs, you may feel the world has gone on without you as well as without the person you have lost. Most people report that some days are not so bad, and other days—even years later—a grief storm arrives. These difficult days are most likely to happen on anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays, although they may sometimes come without any apparent reason. Some people can just accept the fact there will be difficult days after a loss, and they just must get through these days the best they can.

However, if you dread these days or feel that they are so difficult you can barely function, it can help if you prepare for them in advance. Here are some ideas that can help you prepare for difficult days and accept them as part of the grieving and healing process.

- **Make a comfort kit.** Place things that comfort you in a special box and put it in a location where you can easily find it. You might put in candles, favorite bath oils, or whatever brings you comfort. This is an act of self-love, and you will feel that when you pull it out to use.

- **Create lists.**

- o Create a playlist of uplifting music. No poignant songs about loss; instead, choose songs that are as cheerful as you can stand!

- o Make a list of supportive people you feel comfortable reaching out to so you do not fall into the “nobody cares about me” pit.

- o Ways to get yourself moving. You might go for a walk, dance, practice yoga, or garden. Identify what it will take to engage in physical activity.

- o Feel-good resources, which might include movies that make you laugh, books that inspire you, food that brings you comfort, visits with children or animals, and so forth.

- o Places in nature you love to go. Whether you take a vigorous hike or sit and listen to the birds, nature is healing.

- o Words or affirmations. This might include statements like, “It’s ok to feel sad,” “This will not last forever,” “You can get through this,” “You are so strong,” “It’s ok to have a bad day,” and “You don’t have to fake it.”

- o Places to go. A weekend visiting a friend, a day playing tourist in your hometown, or taking a larger trip all move you out of your daily routine and thought patterns. You are likely to come home refreshed and less vulnerable to a grief attack.

- **Keep a gratitude journal.** List ten things you are grateful for every day. Then, when you are having a difficult day, you can pick up your journal to remind yourself there are so many good things in your life that balance out the grief.

- **Participate in a grief group or online forum.** When the tough days come, you will have a group of people who understand and support you in a deep way.
- **Reach out for help.** If difficult days come too often, grief is negatively impacting your relationships or work, or if you start to wish for your own death, seek professional help.

What to Do

Use the suggestions above to make a plan for coping with difficult days. What belongs in your comfort kit?

Where will you store it? _____

Choose three of the lists mentioned above that you would like to make.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Summarize your plan for your next difficult day. Be creative.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Coping with Holiday Stress Following Divorce or Separation

What to Know

Going through a separation or divorce sometimes means giving up the dream of a perfect holiday season – or at least reinventing what the holidays mean to you and your children.

In addition to the stress of the breakup, managing the demands of seasonal events, holiday schedules, gift exchanges, and other special celebrations can place an additional strain on you. You may find that the holidays stir up different feelings for you and your children because of the loss of the family unit. So, what can you do to manage during this challenging time? To keep things in perspective, reduce your stress, and keep your children's needs a priority, follow these suggestions.

- 1. Plan and remain flexible.** Take care of all the practical items on your list and organize your time in advance. If you are having trouble with your ex in figuring out the schedule or other holiday logistics, avoid including your children in the conflict. Managing the details and schedules is up to the adults.
- 2. Be respectful to your ex.** Acknowledge that your children have a right to spend time with both parents during the holidays.
- 3. Be honest about the changes in your family.** Avoid pretending that everything is the same, and let your children know what has changed.
- 4. Be aware of your own feelings of sadness, anger, or loss.** Model to your children that life moves forward, and you can still find happiness even though you are upset sometimes. Give them permission to celebrate and be joyful without worrying about how you are feeling.
- 5. Socialize.** Make loved ones a part of your holiday celebrations. If you have down moments, surround yourself with people who love you and can support you.
- 6. Spend quiet time with your children.** Play games, listen to holiday music, watch your favorite seasonal movies, and read your favorite holiday books.
- 7. Maintain meaningful and familiar traditions even if they feel different.** Your children will always remember annual holiday traditions and will enjoy creating new traditions with you. Allow them to contribute their ideas and shake things up to do some things differently.
- 8. Allow authentic feelings.** If your child is sad, avoid pushing them to get over it. Let them be sad and allow them to talk about how they are feeling.
- 9. Acknowledge the loss but avoid emotional triggers.** The holidays can be hard enough without taking trips down memory lane. If it is too painful to look at old photos, for example, do not do it!
- 10. Remind yourself of the things for which you are grateful.** Even though you might be experiencing a difficult holiday, remember all the good things in your life.
- 11. Do something for someone else.** Find a way for your family to do something meaningful, like participating in charity work or an activity for those less fortunate.

12. Remember it is not the stuff that matters, but rather the connections. Your time, attention, and presence are more important to your children than lavish gifts. Take the time to rebuild a sense of family.

13. Let go of guilt. Perhaps you feel guilty about changing the holidays for your children. Remember, different is not bad, but if your children see how upset and guilty you feel, it negatively impacts their experience of the holiday season.

If you follow the above suggestions, you will effectively cope with holiday stress and help your children manage the holidays in a healthy way.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

What are some ways you can work with your ex to ensure a smooth holiday season?

What are some ways you can cope with your feelings?

Who can support you during the holidays? Write down three or four names.

What are some new traditions you can create with your children?

What are some activities from the past you can continue doing with your children?

For the next month, use the following chart to plan activities for you and your children. Using the above suggestions, do at least one thing each week. Note the date, the activity or event, and how your children reacted (positively or negatively). Write down your experiences, too (thoughts, feelings, and so on).

Date	What did you do?	How did your children react?	What was the experience like for you?

Did this exercise help you better manage the holidays with your children? Why or why not?

What did you find difficult about this exercise?

Did anything surprise you about this exercise? If so, explain.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Do You Have the Holiday Blues?

What to Know

The holiday blues are temporary feelings of sadness, depression, or anxiety during the holiday season. You might feel it leading up to the holidays, or after the holidays are over. Some people find great joy in holiday social events, shopping, family gatherings, and celebrations, but for some, this is a stressful and overwhelming time filled with heightened emotion and too many demands.

The holiday blues are sometimes associated with seasonal affective disorder (SAD), but the two are not directly related. You might suffer from the holiday blues *and* SAD, which is a diagnosable problem linked to fewer hours of sunlight. People with SAD typically find themselves depressed throughout the fall and winter. The holiday blues are usually not as severe as depression.

Perhaps you are grieving a loved one, have financial difficulties, or you have negative memories of past holidays. Perhaps you are unable to be with family for the holidays. You might be so busy you fail to fit in physical activity and nutritious meals. All these things can contribute to feeling down during the holiday season. Here are the symptoms of the holiday blues:

- tiredness and lack of energy
- amplified depression
- changes in appetite or weight
- decreased motivation
- problems with sleep
- tension, worry, or anxiety
- frustration and irritability
- loneliness or isolation
- heightened stress
- sadness
- unrealistic expectations
- losing interest in things that used to bring you joy
- a sense of loss

Are you experiencing any of the above symptoms? If so, write them down.

Here are some suggestions to manage your symptoms.

1. Limit alcohol. Drinking excessively can negatively affect your mood. If you attend an event where alcohol is being served, try to limit yourself to one or two drinks.

- 2. Get plenty of rest.** Try to go to bed at the same time each night. Feeling well-rested can improve your mood and help you feel energized and refreshed.
- 3. Say no.** Overscheduling can lead overwhelm and stress. Remain firm when you say no, and schedule time for yourself instead.
- 4. Try new traditions.** You might have expectations of what you think the holiday season should look like – but this may not be what actually happens. Instead, be flexible and allow new traditions to unfold. Focus on connection and remember past holidays with fondness.
- 5. Get support if you are grieving.** If you have experienced the loss of a loved one, the holidays can be especially difficult. Although it can be tempting to isolate yourself and grieve, try to spend time with loved ones. You can also seek help from a therapist or support group.
- 6. Spend time with loved ones.** Get your friends or family together for a celebration at your home, or plan an outdoor outing like caroling, ice skating, or sledding.
- 7. Exercise regularly.** Physical activity will boost your mood. Even a quick 10-minute walk will get your heart rate up and release mood-boosting endorphins.
- 8. Distract yourself with some fun.** If you have recently experienced a breakup, it can be difficult to be alone during the holidays. Instead of staying at home, schedule some enjoyable activities into your calendar, like volunteering for a local charity or participating in a holiday fun run.
- 9. Avoid overeating.** Overindulging in sweets or fatty foods can negatively affect your mood and overall well-being.
- 10. Make time for yourself to relax.** Plan on 20 minutes a day to enjoy quiet time, read a book, listen to music, take a bath, do yoga, or engage in a hobby to reduce stress levels.

Other ideas: _____

What to Do

Referring to the above list, what are some actions you are willing to take to cope with the holiday blues?

Write down the names of people who can support you through the season.

Choose 2-3 activities you will do consistently (you will plan and do them at least three times/week).

What are you willing to do every day?

Use the following chart to record what you do to cope with the blues throughout the holiday season. Note the date and how you felt before doing the activity. Describe what you did and if anyone was involved. Finally, write down how you felt after.

Date	How you felt before	What did you do?	Who was involved?	How did you feel after?

Date	How you felt before	What did you do?	Who was involved?	How did you feel after?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you while completing this activity? Explain.

Did this activity help you manage the holiday blues? _____

Why or why not? _____

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Anticipating Difficult Holiday Interactions

What to Know

Holidays often put you in contact with people who might be difficult to get along with, leading toward a common problem called “holiday dread.” Often, these interactions will be minimal compared to the many pleasant times of the day, but it is common for people to magnify their importance, so that just thinking about what may happen affects their mood for days or even weeks before a holiday gathering. This worksheet can help minimize the impact of dealing with difficult people at holiday events.

See if you recognize any of these behaviors and if you do, fill in the blanks with the appropriate names.

_____ will talk about themselves and show no interest in you.

_____ will be sarcastic and aggressive and will try to pick a fight.

_____ will be critical and is sure to say something negative about you.

_____ seems to hold something against you and will not even acknowledge your presence.

_____ will flirt with you inappropriately.

_____ will bring up topics of conversation that will make you uncomfortable.

_____ will be so obsessed with their children you will feel ignored and unimportant.

_____ will look for some way to bully you and make you feel small.

_____ will control the conversation and dismiss your opinions.

Keep this worksheet in a private place where people who might be offended will not see it. You may use fictitious names that only mean something to you.

Most people find that if they are ready for these problems with some simple solutions, even the most difficult interactions are not so bad. When dealing with difficult people at a holiday gathering you can:

- excuse yourself and walk away.
- smile and listen while breathing calmly to relax.
- think positive things about yourself.
- change the subject of the conversation.
- state your feelings in a non-aggressive way.
- interact with someone else.

- be empathic and think about why they may be acting this way.
- take the high road, and remain tolerant, kind, and respectful.

Above all, be prepared.

What to Do

Use the next page to anticipate the difficult interactions that may occur and the positive responses you can make.

Fill in the blanks for difficult interactions you anticipate may occur. Be as specific as possible. Make sure your planned responses are positive and will not make you or someone else feel worse. If you feel that can improve future interactions with a friend or family member, you may want to schedule a time to work on your relationship at another time. Holiday events are rarely a good time to work out long-standing relationship problems.

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

If _____

Then _____

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you find difficult about this exercise?

Did anything surprise you about this exercise? If so, explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Coping with Family Drama During the Holidays

What to Know

Most families experience some type of drama, and the level or type is different for every family and is often experienced differently within families. Many families have dynamics that cause stress or anxiety for some members when they are together. While family occasions may be frustrating and stressful for you, other family members may enjoy them and not understand why you find them challenging.

What exactly is family drama? Family members that create drama usually display behavior that results in intense emotional reactions. Perhaps they are gossipy, loud, inappropriate, or aggressive, or they drink too much alcohol. Maybe they react in dramatic or chaotic ways or discuss politics or other controversial topics.

Instead of getting upset your family cannot meet certain standards, consider how you can reduce the distressing feelings family drama stirs up for you. Here are some healthy ways to deal with family drama the next time you attend a holiday gathering or family event.

1. Set realistic expectations. You cannot control family members or get them to be who you want them to be. Anticipate what may happen so you are not shocked or surprised.

2. Practice self-care. Avoid stressful situations before family events and do activities that produce positive emotions, like:

- meditating.
- exercising.
- going for a walk out in nature.
- doing a creative activity.
- practicing yoga.
- taking a long bath.
- watching a funny movie.
- writing in your gratitude journal.

3. Identify your triggers. Family members may “push your buttons” or trigger you. Triggers are topics or situations that activate your nervous system, resulting in intense emotions. When you are triggered, your heart rate may increase, your body may become tense, and you may prepare for “fight or flight.” You can cope with triggers by identifying them. Think about what issues or situations push your buttons and why they upset you.

4. Choose your battles wisely—and do not try to win. Not every battle is worth having, even when an old argument arises, or you are triggered. Most fights do not change anything, so ignore comments, change the subject, and preserve your energy. If you find something is meaningful enough to address, avoid a fight by:

- using “I” statements that reflect your opinion, feelings, and experiences.

- being open and imagining how the experiences of others have led them to their perspectives.
- sharing your perspective without the goal of changing minds.

5. Opt out. You may invest time and energy in maintaining healthy and positive relationships with family, but there are times when you may require boundaries. Family drama can lead to codependent relationships, and it is likely that family members who create drama lack adequate boundaries. It is up to you to establish healthy boundaries for yourself because you are in control of your own time, energy, and mental health.

6. Avoid taking things personally. While family drama can feel personal, try to separate yourself from the situation. If family members treat you badly, it is often about them. They may not have the tools to cope with their emotions, so they project it on you.

7. Choose acceptance. Choose to lovingly accept your family for who they are and how they behave. Observe rather than judge. Offering unwanted advice rarely helps, especially if someone has been that way “forever” or addiction is a factor.

8. Remain calm. Sometimes someone else’s strong reactions can contribute to you arguing, yelling, slamming doors, or leaving. Prepare yourself to remain calm by breathing slowly and deeply. Allow the drama to float past you like a warm summer breeze, and remind yourself, “I’m staying calm, I’m not reacting.” This does not mean you cannot address poor behavior. You can redirect the conversation or excuse yourself.

9. Take breaks. You may go outside and enjoy fresh air for five minutes or excuse yourself to use the bathroom to calm down. Play a game with children that are present. Removing yourself from the drama can help you regulate your emotions, and it might diffuse the situation.

If drama has turned family occasions toxic, you have options. Speak with a coach or counselor to better understand why you get triggered, learn to set boundaries, and communicate clearly. If the situation is harmful, you may have to consider whether you will attend family events.

What to Do

Describe the drama that typically happens at family events.

How do you usually react? How do other family members react?

Write down issues or situations that push your buttons. Describe why they upset you.

If your reactions have not always been healthy, what can you do differently?

List some self-care activities you can engage in before attending family events.

What is one thing you can do to prepare yourself before the next family event? Be specific.

What can you choose to simply accept? Is this difficult for you? Explain.

You may want to set boundaries around time spent with family. Decide what times, days, and holidays you will spend with your family.

What else can you do to make family events more pleasant?

Reflections on This Exercise

What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

How motivated are you to address family drama? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

Managing Difficult Conversations During the Holidays

What to Know

Family gatherings might become tense when topics of disagreement arise with loved ones. Such conversations can be stressful and can lead to hurt feelings or create ongoing discord. When you expect challenging conversations, you can prepare yourself in advance and plan how to de-escalate heated exchanges.

In some cases, setting boundaries lets loved ones know their statements or questions are problematic. It may be useful to focus on what brings your loved ones together instead of what divides you. For example, discuss shared hobbies or share fond memories from the past. Brainstorm alternative topics and conversation starters in advance.

Ultimately it is up to you to prioritize your mental health while balancing the desire or obligation to attend holiday gatherings. Here are some suggestions to help you navigate difficult conversations so you may leave the gathering appreciating the time spent together.

1. Prepare. Consider neutral topics of conversation that will not lead to conflict. Think about the things you have in common with the other guests, and plan key talking points.

2. Redirect. Plan ahead so you can quickly pivot when difficult topics come up. For example, if someone brings up a controversial political view, instead of agreeing or disagreeing, redirect the conversation to a related “safe” topic.

3. Rehearse. If you know you will be challenged on your points of view, prepare a position statement. You can then respond calmly and firmly using your rehearsed response. Since you know your family, you can probably anticipate certain comments, questions, or discussion topics. Think ahead and come up with statements or a script that will help you respond and stand your ground without being triggered.

4. Recount happy memories. Tell a story that brings everyone back to a shared pleasant occasion. Give others a chance to participate by filling in details. For example, you might say, “Remember when we spent New Year’s Day in our pajamas and watched funny movies all day? We’ve really had some great times together!”

5. Focus on fun family traditions. Traditions can be inexpensive and take little time. Play games, sing songs, visit a holiday display, volunteer, or go for a winter hike as a family.

6. Practice gratitude. Share your appreciation for loved ones and invite others to do the same.

7. Connect and cope. Write down a list of loved ones you can call following difficult interactions, as well as coping strategies that work best when you are upset.

8. Choose to be alone. Perhaps you believe you are better off spending the holiday season alone. That is perfectly acceptable. Reflect on holiday traditions you enjoy that you can engage in. Or, come up with a plan that includes activities that provide a healthy distraction.

Despite your best intentions, you may still experience difficult conversations during holiday gatherings. Being prepared will lessen the negative impact they have on you. Completing this worksheet can help you prepare for these interactions, set your expectations, and employ strategies to feel empowered and in control.

What to Do

Answer the following questions.

How can you prepare for potentially difficult conversations? Brainstorm neutral or “safe” topics of conversation below. Include key talking points.

Are there specific points of view you know you will be challenged on? Explain.

Write a script that will help you appropriately respond and stand your ground – lessening the likelihood you will be triggered.

Perhaps you have decided to be alone during the holidays. What will you do instead of spending time with family or other loved ones?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Coping with Family Estrangement During the Holidays

What to Know

The holiday season is filled with family-centered activities and traditions, and you might believe that everyone is happily celebrating with loved ones. The truth is many families experience conflict, tension, or even estrangement. One study found more than 40% of participants had experienced family estrangement at some point.

Perhaps you feel isolated and alone if spending time with family is not an option for you. You might experience a mix of emotions that includes sadness, jealousy, anger, anxiety, shame, or worthlessness. If you are estranged from your family, here are some tips to make it through this emotionally challenging time of year.

1. Accept your feelings. For example, if you are sad – acknowledge you are sad, allow yourself to feel sad, and be present with the sadness. This process of acknowledging, allowing, and being present with your feelings builds resiliency and increases self-trust. This is especially helpful if your feelings were dismissed by family in the past. Ignoring your feelings or harshly judging yourself for having them can strengthen and prolong your discomfort.

2. Identify at least one coping mechanism. Perhaps you can write (but not send) a letter to your estranged loved one(s), engage in mindful meditation, or exercise. You might journal, focus on things for which you are grateful, practice yoga, or watch a funny movie. Determine one (or more) activities that will help – *before* you need them. So, when you are triggered, you do not have to find a healthy way to cope. Instead, you can channel your energy into doing whatever you need to feel better.

3. Determine how you will spend the holidays. It might be overwhelming to think about how you will spend Christmas Day or Hanukkah evenings, for example. But it is important that you come up with a plan for those significant days. Maybe you will schedule FaceTime with a friend or participate in a holiday 5k race. Whatever you decide to do, put each activity in your calendar. This will prevent you from having nothing to do and engaging in unhealthy or destructive habits.

4. Delete social media apps. Even if it is temporary, it might be helpful to be tech-free if social media contributes to difficult feelings during the holidays. Be aware of your triggers – if reading negative news on Twitter makes you feel awful or seeing happy family photos on Facebook is upsetting – consciously avoid the social apps.

5. Make a list of your positive attributes. Remind yourself of everything great about you – particularly if you blame yourself for family estrangement or difficult relationships. It is important to remember why you are worthy of love and respect. Write down your list or put it on your phone so you can read it whenever you need to remind yourself.

6. Avoid isolating yourself. When you feel alone, it might feel easier to pull away from others. However, it is important that you avoid isolating yourself even more. Find ways to engage with

people who provide you with a sense of security and connection. Talk about your family situation with people you trust.

7. Check in with your counselor or coach. Review your plan with them before the holiday season and fill them in on how it went after.

8. Remember the season is temporary. “Holiday culture” might feel overwhelming, but it only lasts a few weeks out of the year.

9. Serve others. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or clean out your closet and donate clothes to a local shelter. Foster a homeless cat or dog or host a holiday dinner for others who are also alone. When you serve others, you feel good about yourself.

Only you can decide what is the best way to support yourself during the holiday season when you are estranged from family. This worksheet will help you cope.

What to Do

If you are estranged from your family, describe what happened. Be as honest as you can.

Mentally prepare for the holidays by identifying potential triggers that may cause stress, sadness, anxiety, or discomfort during this time of year. Write them down.

How can you serve others? Come up with one activity you can participate in.

Use the chart below to record what you do to cope with estrangement throughout the holiday season. Write down the date, what you did, how you felt afterwards, and who was involved.

Date	What did you do?	Who was involved?	How did you feel after?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you while completing this activity? Explain.

Did this activity help you successfully cope? _____

Why or why not? _____

What else can you do to cope?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Managing ADHD During the Holiday Season

What to Know

If you have ADHD, you are more likely to feel overwhelmed and stressed by the demands of the holiday season. Can you relate to any of the following?

- you overindulge in rich foods, sugar, and alcohol, worsening ADHD symptoms and leaving you with brain fog, low energy, and even depression
- your typical structure and routine are disrupted, leaving you feeling disorganized, unproductive, or overwhelmed
- you are bored under-stimulated when you are not working
- juggling all the holiday tasks is frustrating and impacts your confidence
- you feel anxious when you are not working because at work you are productive, hyper-focused, confident, and calm
- you overschedule yourself and forget to send greeting cards or purchase a gift

In addition, there are all the other reasons why you might find the holidays stressful – like coping with grief or dealing with strained family relationships.

Here are some ways to manage ADHD during the holidays so you can actually enjoy the festivities and pleasures associated with the holiday season!

1. Make a master list of everything you need to do. Include shopping, card writing, decorating, buying food, and attending events. Once you have a master list, sort it by importance or by date. Each day, you will know exactly what you need to accomplish. List every necessary task to help you stay on track. If the list is overwhelming, remember you do not have to do everything. Highlight items that are essential and eliminate those that are unnecessary.

2. Use a calendar or planner. Even though you might want to say “yes” to all the activities, it might be unrealistic. Map out all the activities, parties, traditions, and celebrations you have committed to throughout the season. This gives you a visual of how much you are taking on.

3. Simplify. Given all the demands of the holidays, keep the demands you place on yourself simple and downsized to avoid burnout. Reflect on your expectations and write down what you can scale back on. You can always add on if you have extra time.

4. Manage your stimulation and know your limits. You might become easily overstimulated – and the holidays are filled with lights, music, crowds, and noise. Be sure you are prepared to cope. Perhaps you can bring earplugs to noisy events, wear blue light blocking glasses, or prepare an escape plan if it all becomes too much. Or simply say “no” to activities where there is too much noise or large crowds of people.

5. Get enough rest. The holidays can be exhausting, and when you get enough sleep, you are more likely to handle all the tasks and activities on your calendar.

6. Focus on ease and convenience. If shopping in crowds is difficult for you, shop online or purchase gift cards. Limit the number of stores you need to visit, or shop during off-hours.

7. Do a potluck or order out. If you are hosting a holiday dinner, ask each person to bring something to contribute to the meal. Perhaps you can order a precooked meal from a local store or restaurant.

8. Include self-care on your to-do list. Prioritize eating well, exercising, and relaxing each day. Caring for yourself will increase your energy and focus.

9. Delegate. When you feel overwhelmed, ask loved ones to take on tasks. You do not need to tackle every holiday chore yourself.

10. Follow a budget. Overspending can add to your stress if you worry about whether you have enough money to finish shopping or pay your bills. Set a realistic budget for how much you can spend – and stick to it. While you might be tempted to overspend on credit cards, you will feel better when the holidays are over, and you are not faced with a stack of credit card bills.

11. Prioritize physical activity. It might be much harder to fit in daily physical activity, but it is essential you make time for exercise to manage stress. You can set an alarm for early evening to think about your next day and schedule when you will exercise. Prepare all the things you need to make sure it happens – lay out your clothes, shoes, and water bottle, for example.

12. Keep a gift list. Write down every person you usually get a gift for – loved ones, the mail carrier or hairdresser, friends, kids' teachers, and so forth. Then, check your calendar. Are you attending any celebrations where there might be people that give you gifts? Perhaps there are parties that require a hostess gift? Write those names down. Write down the gifts you need to get. To make it easier, you might purchase several of the same gift baskets or wreaths, for example.

13. Communicate. Let your loved ones know what you need this holiday season. Own your limitations, take breaks when needed, and offer solutions to take the burden off yourself and others.

14. Plan some fun. If you tend to sit around feeling bored on your days off, plan one enjoyable thing to do.

15. Designate a box, basket, or some other container as your holiday file. When you receive an invitation or anything that calls for a decision or action, put it into the container to deal with later. Each week throughout the holiday season, sit down with family members to review all the materials in the container. RSVP, write the check, record the event in your calendar, or do whatever is required.

This worksheet will help you track what you do to manage your ADHD during the holiday season.

Review your list. Circle items you can delegate and cross off items you can scale back on (or say “no” to). Check the box when complete.

Now, pull out your planner or open your online calendar, and schedule all activities, events, and tasks. Check the box when complete.

Schedule downtime, exercise, and even sleep each day. Check the box when complete.

Create your holiday file container. Check the box when complete.

Now, write down some ways you can focus on ease and convenience. For example, you might buy bulk hostess gifts, do most of your shopping online, or pre-order the big holiday dinner from a local restaurant.

Write down your “gift list.”

What was the biggest obstacle you encountered when completing this exercise? Describe.

Did this activity help you reduce stress and overwhelm during the holiday season? _____

Why or why not? _____

What did you learn from this exercise?

Staying Sober During the Holidays

What to Know

The holiday season is often associated with indulgence and excess. This can lead to problems if you have a substance use disorder. If you are in recovery from alcohol or drug addiction, holiday stress might make it difficult for you to remain sober. In addition to family tension, unfulfilled expectations, overscheduling, and possible financial strain, you might miss support group meeting, or your sponsor might be out of touch. What can you do to maintain your sobriety and avoid relapse? Here are eleven strategies that will help you navigate the holiday season.

1. Plan. Holiday celebrations often involve alcohol, and people will likely offer you a drink—and they might not understand why you prefer to be sober. Prepare yourself for uncomfortable situations and triggering environments. Your plan might include:

- attending a support group meeting before a party
- inviting a sober friend to attend the event with you
- meeting with your sponsor or talking on the phone with a sober friend
- driving your own vehicle to holiday events so you can leave early
- limiting time around stressful situations and difficult people
- paying close attention to relapse triggers (H.A.L.T): Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired
- practicing what you will say to refuse alcohol or other drugs
- having an excuse to leave early, if necessary

2. Examine expectations. Speak with your sponsor or a loved one about the emotions and expectations you have about the holidays—especially if you feel resentful or replay negative memories in your head. If difficult feelings are left unchallenged, the stage is set for relapse.

3. Be of service. Serve a meal at a homeless shelter, volunteer at an animal shelter, or spend time with a homebound elderly neighbor. There are many ways to give back, pay it forward, and be of service.

4. Keep a drink in hand. At family gatherings and social events, hold on to your favorite non-alcoholic drink so people will be less inclined to offer you an alcoholic beverage. Be mindful when you ask someone to get you a drink, because they may misunderstand or forget you are sober. If you accidentally take a sip of an alcoholic beverage, it does not mean you have relapsed.

5. Avoid relapse triggers and traps. During this stressful and overwhelming time of year, if you know certain people will ask you inappropriate questions or pressure you to drink or use drugs, avoid them. If you know an event will be especially difficult, make a brief appearance or avoid attending altogether. Saying yes when you should say no can leave you feeling resentful. Saying no is perfectly acceptable and it will protect you.

6. Practice self-care. Care for your body, mind, and soul. Proper nutrition, healthy physical movement, and restorative sleep do wonders for your well-being. The better you feel emotionally and physically, the stronger you will be. Find some quiet time each day for relaxation and meditation.

7. Increase support. Surround yourself with supportive loved ones who will help you remain sober. Commit to attending meetings or support groups, either in-person or online. Schedule appointments with your therapist, counselor, or coach. Add these appointments to your calendar—and keep them. Ask your sponsor and loved ones to regularly check in with you.

8. Establish new traditions. As you affirm your sobriety, you choose to celebrate the new, better, sober life you have created. Perhaps you can host a festive sober gathering with friends in recovery.

9. Focus on the true spirit of the season. Regardless of your faith or spiritual beliefs, the holidays are about giving and gratitude. When you focus on these, resentment, anger, worry, disappointment, guilt, or self-loathing tend to show up less often.

10. Cope with cravings. Write a list of what helps you cope—calling a loved one, reading recovery books, exercising at the gym, praying, taking a hike in nature, and so on. Consider what has worked in the past. If you cannot think of anything, just stay sober for one minute. Then two minutes. Then set an alarm for five minutes and start doing something like folding laundry or baking cookies. When you have managed to get through five minutes, go for ten. Keep increasing the time. Tell yourself you only need to focus on not using right now, this minute, this hour, this day.

11. Consider rehab. If you are struggling and you have relapsed, consider addiction treatment.

Staying clean and sober is possible during the holiday season, and you might actually have an enjoyable holiday season if you focus on the people and activities that strengthen you on your road to recovery.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Who can support you during the holiday season? Write down the names and phone numbers of at least four people.

Write down some ways you can practice self-care. Be specific.

What are some triggers and traps you expect during the holiday season?

What can you do to be of service?

What has helped you cope with cravings in the past?

Next, examine what you have written down and the eleven suggestions above. Create your holiday plan to remain sober.

Share your plan with your sponsor or counselor. Who can hold you accountable?

Next, use the following chart to record what you do to maintain sobriety during the holiday season. Note the date, the event or activity, what you did to maintain your sobriety, and how you felt afterwards. Write down if you followed your holiday plan.

Date	Event or activity	What did you do?	How did you feel after?	Stick with plan? Y / N

Date	Event or activity	What did you do?	How did you feel after?	Stick with plan? Y / N

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you while completing this activity? Explain.

What was the biggest obstacle you encountered when completing this exercise? Describe.

Were you successful at sticking to your holiday sobriety plan? _____

Why or why not? _____

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Coping with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

What to Know

If you experience the blues when the days get shorter and the temperatures drop, you might have seasonal affective disorder (SAD)—a form of depression triggered by daylight and weather changes. It typically begins and ends at about the same time each year, where symptoms start in the fall, continue into the winter months, and go away during the spring or summer. Experts estimate that 4-6% of Americans suffer from SAD, and as many as 20% experience the “winter blues.” These are the common symptoms of SAD:

- sad or down most of the day, every day, in a seasonal pattern
- low energy or fatigue
- sluggishness
- difficulty concentrating
- loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- appetite changes
- weight gain
- hopelessness, worthlessness, or guilt
- sleep problems
- thoughts of death or suicide

Note: If you are thinking of harming yourself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. It is available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

It is important to get treatment and find effective ways to cope with SAD because all forms of depression limit your ability to live your life to the fullest, enjoy time with loved ones, and function well at work or school. To cope with SAD, here are a few suggestions.

- 1. Prepare for shorter days.** Set yourself up for the winter season by starting in the fall—regularly schedule mood-boosting activities, initiate contact with friends, find a new hobby, join a club, or engage in community service. Take part in these activities before the winter blues set.
- 2. Try a light box.** Light therapy—exposure to artificial light to keep your circadian rhythm on track—is considered a first-line treatment for SAD. Light therapy or phototherapy boxes provide light that mimics sunshine. The light is much brighter than that of regular light bulbs and has different wavelengths. Sit in front of the light box for 20 to 30 minutes each day upon waking.
- 3. Use a dawn simulator.** This device is an alarm clock that produces light that gradually increases in intensity, just like the sun. The best ones use full-spectrum light, which is closest to natural sunlight.
- 4. Consider medication.** If light therapy does not completely relieve your symptoms, you might consider taking a prescription antidepressant from autumn until spring.
- 5. Prioritize social activities.** Studies have found a relationship between social isolation and depression. Find creative and enjoyable ways to stay connected with others, like spending time

with loved ones at a local park, playing an outdoor sport, or joining a hiking club. If you cannot get out, Face Time or Zoom with friends and extended family members.

6. Use aromatherapy. A recent study found that essential oils can help lessen symptoms of depression by influencing the area of the brain that is responsible for controlling moods and the internal clock. Using essential oils might be a simple and safe way to improve mental well-being, especially when paired with other soothing activities like a taking a bath.

7. Get into a routine. Perhaps you have trouble falling asleep and waking in the morning. Maintaining a regular sleep schedule and having good bedtime habits can improve your sleep. Avoid the use of electronic devices at least two hours before bedtime.

8. Prioritize physical activity. Regular exercise can help reduce the symptoms of SAD and offset weight gain. Outdoor exercise is most beneficial, but if it is too cold or icy, use a treadmill, stationary bike, or elliptical machine next to a window.

9. Get as much sun exposure as possible. Get outside as much as you can during the day to take advantage of what sunlight there is. Bundle up and take a walk around noon when the sun is brightest. When indoors keep your blinds open to let in as much natural light as possible.

10. Take a break. If you can, take a vacation to a warmer climate to escape the cold. Even a short break from your daily routine in a sunny place can be helpful. If travel is not an option, plan a “staycation”—take time off work and find ways to have fun within your own home and community.

11. Avoid alcohol. If you feel down, you might be more likely to drink alcohol, but drinking contributes to depression.

12. Write in a journal. Consistently using a journal can positively affect your mood because it helps you prioritize your problems and identify triggers. Write about your thoughts, feelings, and concerns each night to reflect on all that happened in the last 24 hours.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

What are some of the symptoms you experience during the fall and winter months?

Have you experienced these symptoms in previous years, at the same time of year? Explain.

What are some things you have tried to cope with SAD? Did they help you? Why or why not?

What else can you do to cope with SAD?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

Reflecting on Past Accomplishments and Setting Goals for the New Year

What to Know

As the year comes to an end, the start of a new year is a great time for self-reflection. You can review what went well, identify how you can make improvements, and discover ways you can achieve your fullest potential in the upcoming year.

Here are tips to help you reflect on the past year and start the new year with positivity and motivation.

1. Journal. Writing is therapeutic because it helps you:

- understand yourself
- release emotions
- organize your thoughts
- prioritize problems
- set and achieve goals
- record ideas on-the-go
- relieve stress
- self-reflect
- enhance your memory
- build creativity

Here are some questions you can answer in a journal or notebook.

⇒ What are you proud of in the past year?

⇒ What went well?

⇒ What didn't go well?

⇒ What lessons can you learn from what didn't go as planned?

⇒ What was the overarching lesson in the last year?

⇒ Where do you want to go from here? *Set S.M.A.R.T. goals using this question – remember to be specific!*

Tip: Review your camera roll or social media posts to help you answer these questions. You will be reminded of the wonderful times that perhaps you forgot.

2. Create a gratitude list. Research has shown that having an attitude of gratitude is one of the best things you can do for your mental health. The more you practice gratitude, the easier it becomes to appreciate the things in your life.

3. Create an accomplishments list. You can refer to this list when you are upset to increase motivation by accessing a different perspective that your present self cannot see.

4. Acknowledge and release the bad. While you want to focus on your accomplishments, you cannot completely ignore what was disappointing or negative.

5. Meditate. Once you complete the above four steps, clear your mind to make room for the new. Find a peaceful spot to sit and close your eyes. Focus on your breath. Practice inhaling for the count of four and exhaling for the count of four. If your thoughts wander, bring them back to your breath. You might want to make this a daily practice in the new year.

6. Gift yourself. Take small opportunities to celebrate yourself and your accomplishments. Perhaps you will schedule a massage or take yourself out for dinner. Do not skip this step! It is important to celebrate *you*.

7. Set goals. What do you want to accomplish during the upcoming year? Set some S.M.A.R.T. goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-oriented). For each goal, be sure to include each of these elements.

8. Make a plan. Schedule the required steps to achieve each goal in your calendar. Small, incremental steps will get you to where you want to be.

9. Choose three words for the New Year. These meaningful words should resonate with you. Choose three words and carry them with you going forward. Some examples:

- Optimistic
- Joyful
- Ambitious
- Creative
- Expansive
- Confident
- Healthy
- Happy
- Adventurous

10. Choose three traits you want to embody in the New Year. Write down three traits you need to become the person who embodies the three words you chose above.

This worksheet will help you reflect on the past year and start the New Year off right by completing the ten activities above.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions in a journal or notebook. Set aside an hour so you can thoroughly answer each question.

⇒ What are you proud of in the past year?

⇒ What went well?

⇒ What didn't?

⇒ What lessons can you learn from what didn't go as planned?

⇒ What was the overarching lesson in the last year?

⇒ Where do you want to go from here?

What are some other questions you can include?

Write down everything you are grateful for that happened or existed in the past year and why. Dig deep and include the reasoning behind each item on the list. Feel the appreciation deep within you.

Now, create your accomplishments list. What are you proud of in your life? What can you say you have done that no one else has?

Make a list of everything disappointing or not-so-positive that happened in the past year.

Tip: Copy the above list and throw it away or set it on fire (in a safe and responsible way).

Now, take some time to meditate. You might only do it for a few minutes. That is OK! Write about your experience below.

How can you celebrate yourself? Write down some ideas, and schedule them in your calendar.

Write down your S.M.A.R.T. goals for the new year.

What are you going to do to take steps toward your goals? What habits will you perform regularly? Be specific.

What are your three words for the new year?

Write down the three key traits you want to embody.

What do these traits mean to you?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?



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Sincerely yours,

The Between Sessions Resources Staff