



The Unitarian Church in Westport

Dealing with the Blues This Holiday

A Reference

November 2021

Coping with Losses and Stress During the Upcoming Holidays

- Grieving the death of family members and feeling that loss more deeply at Thanksgiving and Christmas
- Dealing with brokenness and financial hardship, something many are feeling this year
- Loss of traditional activities and community events due to pandemic concerns
- Isolation due to health concerns and fear
- Pent-up frustrations from the pandemic and the election year (and results)
- Stress and anxiety ratcheted up by worry and uncertainty

Allow yourself to feel a range of emotions. The holidays can bring about a wide range of emotions. You might feel joy, guilt, and sadness all within a few minutes. Allow yourself to feel those emotions without judging yourself or thinking you should be happy or you shouldn't be laughing.

Trust that grief is part of healing. Time doesn't heal the pain associated with a loss; it's what you do with that time that matters. Grief is the process by which you heal. Experiencing the pain—rather than constantly trying to escape it—can actually help you feel better in the long-term.

So while it may be tempting to pretend the holidays don't exist—or to numb the pain with alcohol—temporarily avoiding the pain only prolongs the anguish. Eventually, the holidays will get easier, but only if you allow yourself to experience the grief of going through them without your loved one.

Take care of yourself. We should do this all the time but it's especially important to get enough sleep, to eat right, and to get some exercise every day when stressed. Self-care is not an "extra," even though it may seem to take too much time. Time invested in yourself each day will more than pay off in your general sense of well-being throughout the season.

Develop a self-care toolkit. This can look different for everyone. A lot of successful self-care strategies involve a sensory component (seven senses: touch, taste, sight, hearing, smell, vestibular (movement) and proprioceptive (comforting pressure)). An idea for each: a soft blanket or stuffed animal, a hot chocolate, photos of vacations, comforting music, lavender or eucalyptus oil, a small swing or rocking chair, a weighted blanket.

Everything in moderation. Be mindful of your own tipping points when it comes to holiday indulgences. You already know your limits for alcohol and sweets. Listen to your own good sense and you'll avoid waking up with regret, a hangover or an extra five pounds.

Set healthy boundaries. You certainly don't have to force yourself to face every holiday event or celebratory tradition, on Zoom or not. If 24-hr Christmas music on the radio or social media is upsetting, turn it off! If attending a tree lighting ceremony is likely to bring about too many painful memories this year, be willing to say no. Other people may try to convince you to participate, but you certainly don't have to try to please everyone.

Recognize that the people in your life are who they are. If you are celebrating in person, it is not new information who will be the Scrooge, who will drink too much, who will have unrealistic expectations or who will be generous to a fault. No one is going to change just because it's the holidays. Let go of the idea you can change anyone who bugs you. Find constructive ways to minimize their impact on your life. Put your energy and time into those who know how to love and whose presence makes you happy.

Give people the benefit of the doubt, and a wide berth. A lot of cooped up time can bring out the worst in everyone. Each person will have moments when they will not be at their best. It is important to move with grace through blowups, to not show up to every argument you are invited to, and to not hold grudges and continue disagreements. Everyone is doing the best they can to make it through this.

Give yourself permission to let some things go. Take a moment each morning to gather your thoughts. Make a list of all the things you have to do and want to do. Check off the two or three items that are really important to you. Let yourself entertain the idea of letting go of many of the others — or at least reducing them in some way. Many of us make our own stress by buying into the “should's.”

Focus on what you can control. There are a lot of things you can't control about the holidays. Think about what you can do to lessen the heartache when you can. It's OK to limit your decorations or shop for presents online only. Pick a few things you can do to assert some control over the holiday cheer, and keep in mind that life goes on for other people and it's OK that they are happy to celebrate this year.

Plan ahead. Often, the anticipation over how hard something is going to be is worse than the actual event. So while Thanksgiving dinner may only last two hours, you could easily spend three weeks dreading it. Create a simple plan for how you'll get through the holidays to avoid extending your pain. Often, it's helpful to create an escape plan. Drive yourself to holiday functions or ride with a trusted friend who will take you home whenever you want. Just knowing you can easily leave at any time can help you enjoy the activity much more than you would if you felt stuck.

Take time every day to enjoy something about the season. It's easy to get caught up in the busyness of decorating and shopping and baking and wrapping. But are you enjoying any of it? *Stop. Breathe.* Take a few minutes to enjoy the decorations on the lampposts or to really look at the lights. Savor one of the cookies. Inhale the warm smells coming from your oven. Wrapping a gift can be just another chore or it can be a way to quietly celebrate what the intended receiver means to you.

Stick to your budget. Forty-five percent of those polled in a recent survey done by Think Finance said that the financial stress of the holidays makes them wish they could skip the whole thing. This was true across all income levels. Yes, it's difficult to resist the commercialism, the hype, the

buy, buy, buy messages that are everywhere. But it's important to remind ourselves that overspending is not the only way to express love. Gifts that are made by the giver often are more meaningful and treasured than anything that comes from a store. *Spending quality time* with someone sometimes is the best present of all.

Create new traditions. Don't be afraid to create new traditions this year too. It's OK to get creative and do something a little out of the ordinary. You can also alter old traditions and make them fit better with the new phase in your life.

Reach out. Lonely? Being alone, far from family or without one during the holidays is a key source of stress for many people. Connect with friends and plan some activities that celebrate the season — even if it's via FaceTime or Zoom, or just enjoying a peppermint stick in a cup of tea. Attend your house of worship and stay if there is a coffee hour- Outside! Don't forget to do this for your children as well. Set up virtual playdates with friends daily via FaceTime, Facebook Messenger Kids, Zoom, etc—your kids miss their friends, too!

Get into the holiday spirit by volunteering at a soup kitchen or charity event for needy children. Being in a festive atmosphere with other good people who are doing good work is a great antidote for loneliness.

Seek help. If you are going through a troubling time and need help, please feel free to reach out to Reverend John. You can also reach out to Pastoral Care Associates by emailing pca@uuwestport.org, or leaving a confidential phone message at: 1.203. 227.7205 x 19.

Other contact points for reference:

- **Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC)**- 24Hr 888-774-2900
- **Alcoholics Anonymous:** 866-783-7712 <https://ct-aa.org/meetings>
- **Al-Anon** (family members of alcoholics) <https://www.ctalanon.org/meetings>
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**
1.800.273.8255 <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Have a Safe Holiday!

Wishes your Safer Congregations Committee