

# How to Prioritize Self-Care During the Holidays

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The holiday season is typically seen as a time of joy and merriment; of family and friends gathering and celebrating together. However, many have begun to have honest conversations about the darker side of “the most wonderful time of year.”

For many with mental illness, or those who have family and loved ones who face mental health issues, these can be tremendously difficult times. Perhaps we hope to feel connected to — and understood by — those around us during upcoming celebrations, only to be disappointed. Or maybe we imagine fulfilling family dinners, only to struggle fitting in. We might plan for parties with friends, only to find we’re feeling trapped in our own minds and lost to waves of depression.

These “holiday blues,” however, can be managed. Here are a few ways to create self-care activities to help carry us through the season.

## **Know and Respect Your Limits**

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The holidays are often accompanied by a long list of obligations, errands and events. While these to-do lists can sometimes be fun or exhilarating, they can also be exhausting and emotionally draining. It's important for you to know when to say "enough" or "no." Small, successful outings are much better than running yourself into the ground or over-extending yourself.

You can set boundaries around how much time you spend on holiday tasks; plan for an afternoon trip instead of an all-day excursion, limiting yourself to only one or two stores. Don't forget to take breaks and recharge. Going with one or two friends may also provide support and make the outing a fun activity.

Setting limits can also extend to your social interactions around the holidays. Invest your time and energy in relationships with people who are willing to give back. You need not attend every event you are invited to. Some people are emotionally draining to be around. If you need to, protect yourself by declining their invite. A brief phone call to express your "apologies" and to wish them a happy holiday season offers limited engagement and an easy exit.

## **Set Reasonable Expectations**

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It's natural to have high expectations of the holiday season; everywhere we look, we're reminded that this is a time for family, joy and abundance. However, it's equally important to check in with ourselves about managing our hopes and expectations.

Setting unrealistic expectations for people and events can lead to disappointment. Having no expectations is equally unrealistic and conveys that others don't need to think about you, which can lead to disappointment. An honest and open appraisal of how people have treated you helps to predict how they will treat you in the future.

## **Avoid Known Triggers**

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For some, the holidays are a time of painful reminders. If you find yourself triggered by certain activities or interactions, do your best to replace them with emotionally fulfilling ones. If certain holiday movies remind you of sad times or lost friends, don't watch them.

If a problematic relative or acquaintance is going to a holiday event, consider if you really need to be there. And if you do, then don't actively engage with that person. You can also drop by for a brief check-in rather than attending the full event.

## Find Ways to Give Back

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Giving back, or helping others out around the holidays, is an excellent way to make a positive contribution and provide a sense of purpose and meaning.

If you're looking for ways to get involved during the holiday season, consider offering support to service members deployed in remote areas or dangerous locations. You can also consider donating time to a local food bank. Another option to contribute to your community is by creating Care Kits for individuals experiencing homelessness.

## Decorate for Comfort

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During the holiday season, you may find yourself surrounded by an overwhelming number of decorations. This kind of celebration, however, is not a requirement for your own space. You need not use traditional holiday colors or symbols for decorating (unless they bring you joy, of course). Pick colors that give you a sense of happiness peace, safety, lightness or calm.

Consider a soft blanket to snuggle in with or a favorite pillow to cuddle. Choose a color that makes you cozy. Are there certain fragrances that remind you of a special time or place? Perhaps a new scented candle or an essential oil might help make your house feel a bit more like your safe space and sanctuary.

## Be Extra Giving to Yourself

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While the holidays are an excellent opportunity to look outward and appreciate the people in your life, don't forget to appreciate yourself. Amid holiday shopping and gift giving, perhaps you can buy or make a present for future you — maybe something that will support your mental health or encourage a new and healthy hobby.

Consider mailing yourself a card or two. Think of an encouraging phrase or perhaps write a note reminding you of a strength or a special time. Jot these thoughts down in a card and send it to your future self. Plan that special time to care for your most important commodity — YOU!

We, at The Hecht Trauma Institute are wishing you peace and happiness during the upcoming holiday season. Make sure to carve out time or schedule time for your self-care; it is important for you, and it is important for your friends and family, too.

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