Mental Health at the Holidays

A guide for surviving the holiday season, whether you enjoy it or not

SelfCare Backpack

Mental Health at the holidays

Let's talk about mental health during the holidays.

The holidays have a dual image of being a time of human kindness, family, and warmth, but also a stressful time of wrapping up work, socialising, travel, expense and generally pressure to have a good time.

I have a similar relationship to Christmas and the holidays in general. I grew up in an abusive and neglectful household, where Christmas often meant I had a lot of responsibility to make things go well and be what my parents wanted it to be, but limited power to do so. I used to dread the holidays, usually from July onwards.

Now, I'm out of that environment. I'm in a place where I do have control but I don't have responsibility to make the holidays anything other than my own vision. I generally play games with my partner, cook too much food, and watch films (one year I was cooking to the sound of Mean Girls in the background).

There's still some dread that creeps around the edges. I had years of my brain and nervous system trying to protect me, and it still tries, even 5 years out from my last bad Christmas. I have to talk myself down a little bit, let myself have my feelings but not be overwhelmed by them.

I'm sharing what I've learned in hopes that you can have a happier healthier holiday period, whatever your relationship to the season.

Gem
x

Bonus material: A list of alternative names for this pack

- So you're gonna have a terrible Christmas
- Crap Christmas: a survival guide
- How to use the internet to stop you having a breakdown this holiday season

What's in this pack

This pack is split roughly into two sections. The first half is tips and ideas for surviving the holidays, both in general and under specific circumstances. There are also some resources that you can look at to find more tips or further support if needed.

The second half has some activities for you to put some of these tips into practice.

You can choose to read all the tips or just the relevant ones (though some of the tips are repeated from section to section, so you may find some bits repetitive), and then you can do some or all of the exercises to help solidify your personal plan to get through the season (and beyond).

These tips and exercises are ones that I've used myself to get through tough times, or ones that I know have helped other people.

What I hope you find in these pages is solace, maybe a feeling of not being alone. I also hope you find some practical things you can do to help get through the holiday period.

Contents

What's in this pack 2
General tips for the holiday 4
- Specific situations 5
  - I'm spending holidays alone and I don't want to 6
  - I don't want to fall into a pit of despair due to this year being a trash fire or hate everyone I love due to forced proximity etc 7
  - I'm stuck somewhere that's actively terrible for me 8
  - How do I grieve during the holidays? 9
  - I don't celebrate Christmas and it's everywhere 10
- Resources 11
- What do you need? 12

Prioritisation 13
- Boundaries 16
- What if they react badly? 16

Post Holiday Recovery 17
Gentle reflection 19
- Reflection prompts 20

General tips for the holiday

There are a few tips I'd recommend to anyone going through a rough time, especially at the holidays:-

- Accept your emotions. It's okay to feel sad or resentful or lonely or happy. It's okay to feel a pocket of joy in an otherwise bad situation. Feelings will happen, don't fight against them too much. It's when these feelings overwhelm and eat you up that you need to be concerned. Feel your emotions, stay connected to the real world, and see what your feelings are telling you.

- Disrupt your brain's rumination. If you get stuck in a cycle of thoughts that are unhelpful, take a moment to redirect your brain to something less distressing. Bring yourself back to your present, focus on things you can do. There is evidence that a short burst of physical activity can help you get back into your body and help you manage these cycles. Go for a walk, do some cleaning, do some stretches. Something that will help you distance yourself from the narrative your brain is telling you.

- Reach out to people. Lean on folks if you need company, or distraction. Check in on folks if you know other people are going through a rough time. Offer support, or mutual distraction from the world for a bit. Above all: ask for help if you need it. You deserve it.

- Take an actual break. Doing community work or activism is a balm during troubled times, but remember that being a part of a community means accepting help and support as well as giving it. If you find joy in volunteering or organising something, then do that, but don't push yourself. Remember to prioritise rest and relaxation, especially if you feel like you don't deserve it.

Specific situations

These sections each cover a specific circumstance. They are there for ideas, inspiration, or for supplementing your own self care routine.

I've tried to cover a variety of scenarios, but you might not find one that covers your specific needs. I hope that you can find something that will work for you, or will help you find a direction, even if it doesn't represent you exactly.

I’m spending holidays alone and I don’t want to

Countdowns. Countdowns to seeing people again, to the holidays being over and life regaining some form of normality, whatever that means. Countdown until you get to talk to friends, or countdown to being able to order yourself some excellent food. Break up your day into segments rather than one uniform blob of time you have to drag yourself through.

Make plans. Whether for the holiday period or for afterwards, plans can help with breaking up the time, or providing something to look forward to.

Distractions. Lose yourself in some films or games or books. Old favourites can be useful here as they’ll provide a warm comfort. New things can mean you need to pay more attention to what’s going on so less chance for your brain to ruminate. Go for walks. Throw yourself a dance party.

If your brain gets too toxic, you can try redirecting to better thoughts - gratitude, looking back over good memories, rewatching things that make you smile or laugh. A mixture of distraction and propping up your mood may be an easier way to cope with your feelings if they’re becoming a lot.

Find the little good things. This doesn’t mean telling yourself things are fine if they’re not, it’s about finding the ways that things are okay at the moment. The joy of a hot drink, sending a message to a friend, whatever small thing brings you a moment of happiness and gratitude.

I don’t want to fall into a pit of despair due to this year being a trash fire or hate everyone I love due to forced proximity etc

Alone time is key. Find time to have to yourself, even if it’s just a snippet or two here or there. This will allow you to ground yourself in your body. It’ll be a reminder of the connection you have to yourself and who you are. This is especially useful if you’re having to hide a part of yourself, or bite your tongue to ‘keep the peace’ or are exhausted by the constant togetherness that the holidays can involve.

Limit your exposure to the news. You don’t need to get all the news all the time. Maybe once a day. Maybe once every other day. There is a difference between bearing witness to atrocities and exposing yourself to pain when you’re still processing previous pain.

Make sure you actually enjoy yourself at least once. Play games, watch a film you love, listen to your favourite songs. Finding small pockets of joy will help remind you that these things can co-exist.

I'm stuck somewhere that's actively terrible for me

This is slightly different to being alone - though I am also aware being alone with your thoughts can be actively terrible and harmful for some. Some of the tips from above can absolutely be used here.

Can you escape for periods of time? Offer to run errands or just head out for a short period of time. Getting your own space and time even for a few minutes can be pockets of calm to carry you through.

Headphones can be super useful. I've spent more time than I can remember with one earphone in so I have something calming and familiar in my ear. I also have fallen asleep many times with one earphone in so I have something soothing to listen to as I fall asleep.

Countdowns. This might not be a countdown to freedom if you're stuck living somewhere but breaking time up into more manageable seeming chunks can still be useful. X days til I get to do Y or X days until Christmas is over and I can escape back to work/school/etc.

Lean on people. Have a list of people you can contact, and message them as and when. Ask people to send you funny gifs, animal pictures, or terrible puns. Support can look different for different people, and don't be afraid to ask for what you need.

Find the little good things. Joy can exist in terrible times, and you deserve to find it and experience it. This can be in a quiet moment, watching a favourite piece of media, looking at pet pictures online.

Don't beat yourself up. Do what you need to do to survive. If that means backing down or giving in when you wouldn't normally, or hiding parts of you to keep safe, then do so. This isn't about admitting defeat, it's about prioritising your safety and wellbeing as much as possible.

How do I grieve during the holidays?

If you're mourning a loss of a loved one, I'm so sorry.

Maybe you're grieving something else. The loss of a relationship, a job, health. A version of you that no longer exists. I'm so sorry.

Grief for a person or a death can be different from grief from losing something else, it affects you in different ways. These strategies can work for all types of grief, feel free to take what you need from this, regardless of your situation.

Don't set expectations for yourself. There's no timeline, no 'should' for this type of stuff. Take time, try to take the days as they come, don't beat yourself up if you 'fail'.

Grief is strange. Sometimes it can be about riding a wave, maybe dipping under a bit, then picking yourself up, wrung out and exhausted at the end of it. Sometimes it's about gritting your teeth and getting through something. Sometimes it's remembering, laughing, loving in a way that hurts. As much as you can, feel your feelings, try to go with them for a bit.

Don't feel guilty for having moments of joy or laughter. Enjoy them, let them carry you through the rough times.

Try to keep your regular self care routines as much as you can. Eat, even if you can only stomach a little at a time. Grief is tiring, keep fueling yourself. Keep drinking water. Move, even if it's from the bed to a blanket nest on the sofa, that's enough. Try to do more on the good days, experience them fully, and then lean on that foundation during the bad ones.

What do you need your holiday to look like? If tradition is what you crave then see how you can adapt to bring your practices into your current situation. Maybe what you actually need is to do something different - go for walks, avoid the TV, read, watch non-holiday films. It's okay to do something entirely different.

Reach out to people. Check in with friends and loved ones. If you've lost someone, reach out to people removed from the loss and lean on them.

Be kind to yourself. Recognise that you've survived this year, even if you feel strained or ragged or broken. Appreciate and acknowledge that you're still standing, that

you’re here. That’s amazing. Give yourself the compassion that you’d give anyone else in your position.

I don't celebrate Christmas and it's everywhere

It can feel incredibly lonely to be the person who's different from the majority of the people around them. Especially when it comes to something like Christmas, which is everywhere in the West. It's hard to escape, and hard to navigate.

Often the argument is that Christmas is now a secular holiday, so people can 'just take the good bits', but that's not true for everyone. This is invalidating for people who don't celebrate Christmas (or any holiday with a religious overtone).

In an ideal world you'd be able to opt out and be fine. You'd not get the comments or the pity or however else people respond. It would just be accepted and you could get on with your day. That's not the case, though, and Christmas is enshrined in public holidays and general culture.

So how do you survive?

Focus on you, your loved ones, what you want to do. This is where reminding yourself that you are surrounded by people who love and accept you will really help.

Headphones or earplugs are good for blocking out Christmas music.

Getting into nature is also good. Somewhere green, away from advertising and decorations. You'll be connecting with your body and being mindful, and having a bit of an escape at the same time.

Volunteering in your community may offer a way to find and build connections outside of the context of Christmas.

Change the subject. When people ask if you've put decorations up or if you enjoy Christmas, reply saying you don't celebrate and then change the focus.

I found that if I said 'I'm not really a Christmas person, what are your holiday plans?' most people would happily talk about family and travel and things like that. If you're happy to hear other people's plans, especially if you can find joy from others' joy, you can find this is a way to get attention off you.

Changing the subject entirely is another option. 'Oh, I'm not a Christmas person. How is [work event, personal thing, person's child/pet/etc]?' can help move people along.

AskAManager has a post on Christmas as someone who doesn't celebrate here, and the comments are full of resources: https://www.askamanager.org/2023/12/navigating-workplace-christmas-overload-as-a-non-christian.html

How do I respond to someone who doesn't celebrate Christmas?
Accept their answer. Ask about their plans for the time off without pressure or pity or assumptions. If they change the subject, let them change the subject.

Resources

Here are some resources you may find useful

Captain awkward: funny wonderful writing on all sorts of issues. I particularly recommend her writing on managing family and boundaries:
https://captainawkward.com/
https://captainawkward.com/category/boundaries-2/
https://captainawkward.com/category/families/

Headspace has some meditations and resources for holiday stress:
https://www.headspace.com/articles/holiday-stress

Post Holiday Recovery

The Christmas and New Year season can be tiring regardless of circumstances. There's just a lot more stuff going on, and it's darker and colder, all of which can have an effect on energy levels in general.

This is why I included rest in the prioritisation exercise. Rest and self care tends to be the things that get squeezed out when we're busy, and we need to make sure we're still remembering to look after ourselves. This is true even if you enjoy the holidays. You're still spending energy in different ways, and you need to look after yourself.

Try to be consistent with your self care. Your routine might be out the window, but try to adapt to still do some self care. If you keep some core self care up throughout the holidays it will help you be less tired afterwards, but also make the transition back to your normal routine easier.

Indulge in simple pleasures. I am a winter person. Let me be cosy in a blanket with tea while it's cold out and I am happy. I also have a tradition (I don't know how it started, but I maintain it) to listen to Jeff Wayne's War of The Worlds around December. It's got nothing to do with the holidays, but it's something that brings me great joy as it's a favourite of mine.

Festive burnout

Exhaustion can show in many ways, and it can affect you even when doing things you enjoy. It's important to keep an eye on your energy levels and how you're dealing with the post-holiday exhaustion and build in self care and rest.

These resources will give you an overview of festive burnout and exhaustion and some ways to prevent and recover from the season. They also have links to coping with SAD, anxiety at the holidays, disrupted sleep schedules and more:

https://www.dormeo.co.uk/blog/sleep-health/christmas-exhaustion-what-it-is-and-what-to-do

https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/festive-burnout-tired-christmas

Exercise: What do you need?

Now is a good time to think about what you need this holiday season. You've read some tips and tricks, and maybe have started planning your own survival plans. Now is a good time to start writing them down. Get a pen and paper (or a digital document) and start writing.

Things you can write:
A braindump of ideas, thoughts, and feelings
A list of things that bring you joy
A list of people you can reach out to for support

Prioritisation

I'm terrible at prioritising the time I need to rest.

When looking at the holiday season, where you might be travelling, or dealing with multiple socials, it could be useful to figure out what you're doing, when you're doing it, and if you've got time to rest and recover after these events.

This also has a double benefit of taking things that you need to remember out of your head and into something you can look at and only remember what you need to that day or week.

Here's how I (try to) prioritise my time when it's a busy month.
What do I want to do?
What do I need to do?
What can I say no to? What can I say yes to?
How much rest do I need?

Once you've made a list, it's good to figure out when these things are happening, and how much space is available for you to rest between them. Write these down either on an actual or digital calendar or planner. Show yourself in black and white what you're doing and when. This can also really help you see just how much you're doing and how much time you're already spending doing things. It's a lot easier to say no when you realise that you're doing a lot already.

Then you can build rest and things you want to do around them. I've put a couple of months' worth of paper calendars in this pack, in case you want to try writing them down and need a basic calendar.

Tips to remember:
Saying yes to something means saying no to something else. You can't do everything. You can use this to help prioritise your yes to things that make sense for you to do so.

Is it important or is it urgent? Sometimes things are both, but sorting out things that need to be done at some point vs things that have a deadline or need to be done right now can help you prioritise effectively.

Take a breath. When you've got an insurmountable list in front of you, you'll start to get (more) stressed and your decision making process will be less effective. Take a moment. Breathe, stand up and go for a walk, give yourself a pep talk, then come back.

Use these calendars to start to make a list of things you are going to prioritise. You can use your actual calendar, but if that's full of meetings and pencilled in socials you may find that overwhelming. If starting from scratch feels like a cleaner option, you can use this to go back to the basics.

Month: _____

1	11	21
2	12	22
3	13	23
4	14	24
5	15	25
6	16	26
7	17	27
8	18	28
9	19	29
10	20	30
31		

Boundaries

Boundaries are really important. They can help you maintain your mental health, your relationships, your work-life balance.

Boundaries involve identifying your needs and priorities, communicating them clearly and assertively, learning to say no, and generally prioritising your own self-care. This is really difficult!

There's lots of reasons you may find this difficult: cultural and societal pressures, power imbalances, and not having experience of giving yourself space and time to figure out your needs.

This section will help you break down the process of figuring out your boundaries and setting them.

Firstly, figure out:-

- What are you comfortable with?
- What are you not comfortable with?
- What does ideal (under the circumstances) look like?
- What is the most risky thing you're willing to do? (Risky to physical or mental/emotional health)
- How much control do you have?
- How much responsibility do you have?

You might not have an answer for all of these. These are just a rough guide to how I figure out big boundaries that I need to set.

Having an idea of these things can help you figure out your comfort zone and make it easier to mark those lines out. It also means you're less likely to be caught off guard if you have all these things sorted.

Practice saying *'no'*. '*No, I can't*'. '*No, thank you*'. '*That's not possible this year*'.

Captain Awkward is an advice column that I really enjoy, and she has a whole section dedicated to boundaries of all sorts. Her advice is practical, kind, and fully. I highly recommend you check some of her work out.

What if people react badly?

They might! It's possible people will be sad or angry, or try to make you feel guilty or silly.

Recognise that people's responses are projections. They're nothing to do with you, not really. Yes, people may feel hurt that you're not willing to do things you may have done in the past. They may think your boundary limits are unnecessary. They are projecting that they're hurt and want you to fix it. That's fine. You still need to set your boundaries. Their feelings are theirs to manage, not yours.

Absolve yourself of responsibility for their feelings. Take time away - set reasonable phone/message availability. Feel sad, angry, and everything that you might feel after this. Also feel relieved, happy, and guilty. There's a lot of feelings that come from setting a boundary where there wasn't one before, especially if the person on the other side isn't as receptive to them.

Breathe and stay firm. The thing with boundaries is you have to be consistent. Otherwise you teach people that your boundaries are negotiable to the point of not existing. It's harsh, it might feel really awful.

But you've got this. Even if you don't, you're doing some work that may help you set boundaries in the future, and that's an amazing thing to do for yourself. Don't beat yourself up if you don't respond to someone pushing your boundaries as well as you'd like, you can use this as a reflection point later. It's hard to get things right when it's a new way of being, give yourself grace.

Remember: it's not your job to keep the peace, even if you've taken that role on previously. It's not your job to be available 24/7.

This might be something to talk to someone about, brainstorm some ideas. You can talk to a friend or loved one. You also can reach out to Mental Health First Aiders or the EAP, who can assist or signpost you to appropriate support.

Gentle reflection

The holidays and the end of the year naturally prompt us to reflect. We have time off, we might be seeing people we don't see day to day, and the year changes.

The temptation is to take this reflection and use it to beat yourself up in order to be a Brand New Person in the new year. This is a lot of pressure. Especially if you're in the Northern Hemisphere and January is a cold, grey month which makes it really hard to do anything new or push against existing habits.

Reflection is a good thing, but we want it to be useful, and kind, otherwise you'll avoid doing it.

The relationship with ourselves is the longest and most important we'll ever have, and reflection is a key part in building that relationship.

First: figure out when and how to do this work.

I like to go for a walk beforehand, enjoy some mindfulness and reflect on the year. Then I make some tea, pop on some music or rain/thunderstorm sounds, and get down to it. I reflect on pen and paper, because it slows me down enough to think about my words and what I mean to say.

I tend to be freeform, allowing the questions to guide me, but following where my thoughts take me.

I try to limit myself to 30 minutes or so, but you may find you need longer. Maybe split it into a couple of sections so you can reflect on what you've written and then come back to finish it. Setting a timer will give you a built-in break. Reflection can be tiring, so taking breaks is useful to help you not exhaust yourself. It can also help if you find yourself going down a rabbit hole. Take a break, re-read what you've written and then you can decide whether you need to move on or if this reflection is useful for you.

The goal is to learn about your feelings and spend some time with yourself. It's not about making plans or beating yourself up or figuring out how to do better. The act of reflecting is the goal.

Reflection prompts

Stand out memories/events of the year:

Spend time looking over the year. Use social media, messages with friends, your calendar, or journal to help remind you of what you've done this year. Find a few standout things (good or bad), to help you frame the reflection.

A year is a long time, so being deliberate about your focus is important to not feel overwhelmed.

Some questions:

What things have changed in your life over the past year?
What are you proud of this year?
Have you handled something particularly well?
What do you wish you handled better over the year? What have you learned from these times?
What are you grateful for this year?
What are your small wins?
What have you loved this year?

This is a fairly long list, so feel free to pick one or two to start. If you come up with your own prompts, note them down here so you can come back to them later.