

# Self-Care for the Holidays: How to Handle Stressful Family Dynamics

Well-Being Tips ✦



The winter months mark a time of celebration for many cultures and faith traditions. While some folks look forward to connecting with their families over lavish meals, others may feel stressed about or even dread the idea of navigating family dynamics while at home for the holidays. So, if your family bears no resemblance to the people featured in most Hallmark holiday films (e.g. incessantly cheerful people donning head-to-toe flannel pajamas and living in what appears to be the set of a Better Homes and Gardens commercial) know you're not alone! Here are some strategies to bring yourself a little more joy and peace this holiday season:

- **Reserve time for your own joy and rest.** Calendars can fill up quickly with family events during winter break, but if you experience challenging family dynamics, those events may not feel restorative to you. Proactively schedule time to recharge and find joy in a way that feels good for you, even if that means saying no to some family engagements. Medical and PA students do not get a lot of time "off," make sure some of it is spent caring for yourself. Check in with yourself to see what kind of self-care activities your mind, body, and spirit need this year. Do you need a day on the couch watching movies and doing nothing? Does meeting up with a friend for a coffee sound more appealing? Being intentional about how you spend your precious downtime can be helpful.
- **Identify neutral topics of discussion.** Often, we take the conversational "bait" to engage in unproductive conflict hoping for a different outcome than the one we've always gotten. Try something new this year! Make a list of neutral topics you can discuss with loved ones. Try to choose topics that are unlikely to elicit strong emotional responses. Examples of neutral discussion topics might be shared interests or hobbies, new recipes, sporting events, or music everyone enjoys.

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- **Plan activities or games.** For some families who experience a lot of conflict, centering the family's attention around a game or activity can help folks connect with one another and pull focus from tense relational dynamics. If it makes sense in your situation, you might suggest a card game, a game of charades, or a family activity like going for a walk after dinner.
  - **Make an exit strategy.** Particularly if you have experienced verbal or emotional abuse within your family of origin, it can be helpful to have a plan for leaving a gathering if anyone's behavior becomes harmful to you. Prior to the event, get clear about what language or behaviors directed toward you are not acceptable and will result in you excusing yourself. If you attend family gatherings with a spouse or partner, it can be helpful to establish a "code word" that indicates to the other when it is time to go.

Time spent at home with family is not a peaceful winter wonderland for everyone, but there are steps you can take to infuse your holiday season with a little more serenity this year. If you find you need additional support navigating challenging family dynamics, it may be helpful to work with a mental health professional.

The Medical Student Counseling Center (MSCC) offers free, confidential personal counseling, disability and accessibility services, academic and career development support, and wellness consultations to MD and PA students.

**Contact MSCC**

osac-mscc@uiowa.edu

(Email should not be used to share confidential information or in the event of an emergency.)

319-335-8056

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