

WINTER AND HOLIDAY

Newsletter 2021-2022



NATIONAL WILDFIRE COORDINATING GROUP
Risk Management Committee - Mental Health Subcommittee



Healthy Holiday Lifestyle

The arrival of the holiday season and the transition of the seasonal operational tempo may bring excitement and stress. For those who work all year, meetings and the demands of wildland fire continue. It may be an excellent time to try to reframe your thinking about the holidays, especially after a long fire season and the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 vaccines provide an opportunity to return to a more normal lifestyle and prevent severe illness, hospitalizations, and death. For some employees the mandate to be vaccinated is creating anxiety, confusion, and anger as they work to decide what is best for them. The indefinite lingering impacts of this virus challenge mental health.

Regardless, it is essential to continue a healthy lifestyle, both mentally and physically.

If the holidays cause you stress, consider viewing using the holidays as an opportunity to enhance your psychological well-being.

There are many helpful steps you can take to lessen holiday stress and feel more optimistic about the

season. You are not alone if you don't embrace the holiday cheer. Take the time for self-care and look at this time from a different lens. Set aside activities to create a healthier mind and body.

Celebrating holidays, gathering with family and friend, and embracing cherished traditions can also provide a good sense of stability.

Whichever way you celebrate the holidays, keep yourself healthy. Here are some helpful ways to approach the season ahead.

Tips for coping with holiday stress:

1. Make a list to prioritize the important activities.
2. Have realistic expectations about what you can and cannot do.
3. Enjoy the present moment.
4. Look to the future with positivity.
5. Volunteer some time to help others.
6. Limit your alcohol consumption.
7. Celebrate the holidays in a new way.
8. Make time being around supportive and caring people.
9. Make time for yourself!
10. Keep track of your holiday spending to reduce financial stress.

What Are the Holiday Blues?

The holiday blues are feelings of sadness. For some, this time can be filled with stress, fatigue, and irritability that tend to occur around the holiday season.

Changes in family dynamics, problems at work, personal losses, grief, health concerns, and other issues can cause overwhelming feelings of sadness.

Factors that can lead to holiday blues are:

- Lack of sleep and your circadian rhythm: <https://www.nigms.nih.gov/education/fact-sheets/Pages/circadian-rhythms.aspx>
- Dwindling sunlight and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/seasonal-affective-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20364651>
- Isolation and the inability to be around friends and family: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected>

Feeling blue and being depressed are not the same thing. Once the holidays are over and normal routines resume, seek help if you are still feeling depressed.

Adapting to Social Norms and Expectations

Transitioning back to our family and society norms and expectations is often difficult once the fire season slows down and we reintegrate. As we take time away from work and enjoy time off, we may be separated from our daily support base. We've had another impactful year in 2021: COVID-19 surged in mid-summer, again mentally exhausting us, and fire season quickly went to PL5, resulting in an endless shortage of resources early in the summer and keeping many of us away from our norms for longer than usual this year.

Some may feel a sense of isolation, even though family and friends surround you. Many friends and family don't understand where you have been and what you have experienced over the past few months. Be patient with yourself – and with them. Recognize this is a typical reintegration stressor.

The holiday season may bring unwanted guests. Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to your expectations. Try to set conversation boundaries, even if they are just yours. Before the gathering, identify your emotional triggers along with the people who tend to drain your energy. This can give you a better sense of direction once you walk into the room. Be respectful of friends and family struggling with the impacts and fears about COVID-19, accept that they may not all be present at holiday gatherings this year and make plans to connect with them in alternative ways. Set social distance boundaries that make you comfortable as you navigate COVID-19 and return to social norms.

Be mindful of top-down authority. If guests are late for an engagement, it is probably not that big of a deal. Enjoy opportunities where you are not required to be the decision-maker. Let someone else do it.

Holiday Blues cont.

You worried about the isolated co-worker who is injured, depressed, or drinks too much. You worked as much overtime as you could to buy the best gifts, only to learn your significant other resents that you were not present most of the year or you find yourself alone this holiday season.

Balancing the chaos of shopping for presents and navigating crowds (especially during COVID-19) can add to this stress. But you are not alone.

The feelings and emotions that you may be experiencing are a personal journey and we may all be affected by different things. Your feelings of sadness are legitimate, and you are not the only person who may not be looking forward to the holiday season.



Navigating COVID-19 and the Holidays

Maybe COVID-19 gives you the easy excuse you desire for limiting yourself in social engagements, but if you are one who relishes the big gatherings, this year may be a difficult challenge. After a long season of engaging in fire activities some of us crave those holiday moments surrounded by friends and family and feeling normal. Now you see these events threatened by the presence of COVID-19. Maybe you have a conflict within family over vaccinations and it is causing strife. Keep in mind that you can use this time to engage in more meaningful connections and find ways to still stay connected.

Here are some guidelines to holiday gatherings:

- Stay home if you do not feel well or are at higher risk.
- Keep gatherings small. Take the time to choose your tribe of friends and family and hold smaller and more intimate gatherings. Take advantage of these close social moments to really enjoy and engage.
- Hold small gatherings outside if possible. Granted, that may be a challenge for some of us in 20-degree weather, but think outside the box and find ways to engage. Consider this your challenge for the winter season: create inventive ways to engage socially but responsibly. Maybe you and a small group of friends meet at a You-Cut-Christmas tree farm and pick out trees, or perhaps you bundle up with a fire pit and an outdoor movie.
- Encourage guests to bring their own drinks and food. This will benefit you, as the host, by taking off the pressure to provide food and beverages for your guest.

Take Time for Yourself

It is okay to take time for yourself without feeling guilty. Be mindful and focus on the present rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything that is going on. Find something that clears your mind, slows your breathing, and restores your calm. See if you can find a quiet setting with a view that makes you smile or feel calm.

Sometimes self-care is the best thing you can do, and others will benefit when you're feeling less stressed.

Many people either choose to spend the holidays alone or end up that way as a matter of circumstance. A solitary celebration is an excellent opportunity to create the holiday of your dreams. Today things are very different, and spending time home alone or taking a trip over the holidays can be a rewarding experience. A holiday does not need to be shared with others to be celebrated. It simply needs to be enjoyed.

Whatever you do, don't be held hostage by the holidays. Make time to rest, recharge, and do something you enjoy.

Finances

Financial stress can impact our mental health and wellness. Holidays create a pressure for many to spend beyond their means. Or perhaps you go overboard spending money on gifts out of guilt for being gone so much. Worrying about debt can affect your sleep. This can begin a vicious cycle; as you lose the ability to sleep, anxiety builds, and you get stuck in this loop. Many employee assistance programs provide financial assistance and planning. Reach out and engage those services (which are usually free). Plan a budget for gifts and stick to it. Maybe you and your family set a goal to make gifts or take a trip together instead of giving presents. Experiences can last a lot longer than toys. Our health depends on us to care for our physical, mental, and financial wellness in order to be complete. If you need assistance creating a budget, seek out programs through your bank or employee assistance program.

Seeking Assistance

If you feel excessively stressed and overwhelmed, consult with a licensed mental health professional. They can help you identify problem areas and assist in developing an action plan for changing them.

You may be remembering those who were lost to a Line of Duty Death (LODD) this past year and perhaps feel a sense of guilt because you made it home for the holidays.

Veterans Crisis Line

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Suicide Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

National Alliance on Mental Illness Depression CBT Self Help App

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.excelatlife.depression&hl=en_US

Warmlines

Warmlines were created to give people support when they just need to talk to someone. Speaking to someone on these calls is typically free and always confidential. They are run by people who understand what it is like to have mental health struggles.

<https://screening.mhanational.org/content/need-talk-someone-warmlines/>

Suicide in the Fire Service Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-YNq0B6O3Q>

Dealing with Financial Stress

<https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/holiday-money>

Find nearby psychologists by visiting APA's **Psychologist Locator:** <http://locator.apa.org/>

Some links in this document will direct you to a non-government website that may have different policies from those of NWCG.