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2020 Holiday Perspective

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My staff and I wish you the healthiest and happiest Thanksgiving. For all of us, celebrating this year will obviously be quieter and more intimate, compared with prior years. One of my COVID lessons is to accept reduced expectations and be grateful for the good that is around us, as each of us does our part to keep the pandemic from spreading.

It is my sincere hope that all Americans redouble our efforts and our prayers to heal our divided and ailing nation. Let's focus our attention on every individual we encounter, and each and every family and community that inhabits this planet. We are all grieving in some way, whether a devastating loss of a loved one, the loss of an opportunity, or something we may have been looking forward to doing. May each of us greet each sense of loss with understanding, and find solace and support.

You may want to keep this issue of our newsletter handy and refer to it throughout the Holiday Season, or anytime you encounter loss or grief.

Here's How We Can Cope When Our Usual Traditions Get Uprooted

By Harvard Women's Health Watch

The holiday season, like just about everything else this year, probably won't look the same as usual. Whether that means going to smaller gatherings without the usual relatives, quarantining when traveling, or staying home entirely, chances are something will be different this year thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. For many who look forward to a full table at Thanksgiving or a big party on New Year's Eve, these changes are unwelcome, and frankly a little depressing.



In response, people may experience emotions ranging from guilt to loneliness to a feeling of disconnected sadness, says Dr. Hilary Connery, assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

"People are hardwired to be social animals," says Dr. Connery. Traditions around holidays, birthdays, and other special events, such as weddings or baby showers, help to preserve those connections in a predictable manner. So, their absence or change leaves some people feeling adrift.

"Grief and loss are challenging on any day, and the holidays only highlight and amplify that feeling of missing out on what was supposed to be your time to get your share of ordinary happiness," says Dr. Connery.

But there are things you can do to make this unusual time easier. Below are some strategies for making the most of a less-than-ideal situation.

Focus on what's important. The holidays may be different, but they can still be meaningful. "Maybe this year you can take a quieter holiday, or think about things that are important in your immediate family unit," says Dr. Connery. "You can also think about things you've wanted to do or change, but have never had the opportunity to do." Treat this time like a sabbatical, a time for rest and introspection, she says. Or put your focus on helping others in some capacity during this time, whether it's through community service or just by being a friendly neighbor.

Accept that change is needed. It's sometimes easier to make changes when you understand their importance. "I think that people need to face the reality of how persistent, pervasive, and deadly COVID-19 is," says Dr. Connery. "The coronavirus couldn't care less about our social desires." Letting go of the idea that things should be a certain way and accepting the need to make changes to protect yourself and others can help you move forward.

Count our blessings. While it may be hard to look on the proverbial bright side in the face of real disappointment, it doesn't hurt to seek the silver lining. For example, while we may miss an annual birthday bash, we probably won't miss the stress of hosting or the extra expense of putting on the event.

Plan ahead. Joining family may be harder this year, but it's not entirely impossible. "If you are alone much of the time, but you look forward to one or a few holidays each year to see loved ones, you might reach out to those loved ones to ask how you can help, and to make sure you will have someone to see at holiday time," says Dr. Connery. "This may mean planning ahead for travel quarantines that are necessary to make it happen. Do it! The trouble is worth it this year." Start the process early so you have more options and time to make adjustments if needed. Ultimately, making plans work means finding safe ways to connect that don't threaten or harm anyone else, says Dr. Connery.

Respect differences. Your risk threshold and your personal risk factors may differ from those of the people around you — and that's okay. When making plans, pay attention and be sensitive to those disconnects.

"Not everyone likes to gather in this way or that," says Dr. Connery. "Many people spend all day on virtual media and could view family virtual gatherings as a burden, rather than an uplifting creative experience. Others have no such demands and are thirsty for virtual contacts. It's all about each person's particular situation, and finding mutually agreeable ways to connect."

The current situation affects everyone differently, depending on their circumstances, temperament, and health.

"So, the real task at hand is appreciating these differences, and then in the light of that understanding, finding creative connections that all can be happy with," says Dr. Connery.

But we also need to recognize that any solution will likely have its detractors. "Unfortunately, not all will be pleased by something the majority wants. This is human nature, so be especially creative at managing outliers who need something different from the majority. And take pleasure and joy in this creative effort to leave nobody behind," she says.

Coping with grief and change in a positive way

What is grief? It is a “break in an attachment,” according to grief expert Amy Florian, who just presented at Commonwealth’s virtual National Conference last week. Florian explained that grief is triggered in six major ways: (a) Relationship loss (death, divorce, business loss, natural disaster, pet loss or betrayal); (b) Material loss (income, job, house burns down); (c) Functional loss (illness, aging, long-haul COVID effects); (d) Role loss (laid off from a job, virtual schooling, empty nest); (e) Intra-psychoic loss (expectations and plans for the future that are altered by events such as a pandemic), (f) Systemic and Assumptive loss (changes in our political system, justice system, health care system, and other alterations that don’t make sense to us). It is easy to see that multiple triggers are coming into play at this time. Our COVID world is now a time of compounded grief.

Keep in mind that grief can follow not only the loss of a loved one, but also the loss of an opportunity or something you were looking forward to doing, such as celebrating the holidays. In the face of unwanted changes, you may even find yourself grieving a sense of normalcy. Make use of what you learned from past experiences with grief to help separate approaches that don't serve you well from those that are healthy and useful.

Examine your responses. A few simple questions can help you identify your usual coping strategies. What do you tend to do when you're distressed? What makes you feel better when you feel awful? Which of your coping strategies are helpful, and which might be hurtful?

Think back. How were deaths and losses handled in your family? Were they largely shuffled away behind closed doors or openly marked and mourned? When did you first experience the loss of someone you loved? Were you allowed to participate in any services? How safe was it to express your own feelings of loss? Was your grief acknowledged, or were you told implicitly or explicitly to stop being so upset? How were sad or angry feelings expressed in your family?

Replace an unhealthy approach. Try to replace one unhealthy coping strategy with a healthier one. For example, when you feel overwhelmed, call a friend to talk rather than downing a pint of ice cream or a stiff drink. Be judicious, though. Seeking solitude when you need it or occasionally taking a second helping of comfort food or a single drink is not necessarily a problem.

For more tips, see the Harvard Special Report Grief and Loss: A guide to preparing for and mourning the death of a loved one, available at www.health.harvard.edu/gl.

My staff and I deeply appreciate the continuing opportunity to work with you. Please let me know if you have any questions or requests. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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