



New York City, NY

Health & Fitness

## Coping Strategies for Holiday Senior Stress

Homebound for the Holidays? Tips for mental health in difficult times

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By Deirdré DeLeo, Associate Director of Programs and Clinical Operations, Visiting Nurse Service of New York

The holiday season is often referred to as the "most wonderful time of the year," but for many, including those who are elderly or homebound, the holidays can heighten feelings of isolation, grief, and upset.

This year may be especially difficult for those experiencing the "holiday blues," as the COVID-19 pandemic has generated fear, distance, and the absence of traditional communal activities. Many times, however, these "blues" are a symptom of something much greater, such as depression, anxiety, or even self-destructive ideation.

Nearly one in four adults ages 65 and older reported experiencing depression or anxiety in August 2020, a rate that has been steady since the start of the pandemic, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Similarly, 46% of older adults in July said that worry and stress related to COVID-19 has negatively impacted their mental health, up from 31% in May.

In my role as Associate Director for Community Mental Health Programs and Clinical Operations at the [Visiting Nurse Service of New York \(VNSNY\)](#), my colleagues and I are trained to observe and skillfully respond to people of all ages who may be struggling with mental health issues. As the holidays approach, and during this time of crisis, it is crucial that we not only stay vigilant of depression and anxiety indicators but also know how to navigate them.

Go Down Memory Lane

While this year may hinder us from annual festivities and time spent with family, it can also serve as a time to slow down and reflect on happy memories. Perhaps you want to remember a holiday tradition that stood out to you the most or watch a favorite Christmas movie from your childhood. Dusting off an old photo album can also be a nice way to relive special moments.

## ...Or Start New Traditions!

You may hear the phrase "unprecedented times" spoken frequently during this pandemic as there is no doubt that our daily lives have shifted dramatically. While this holiday season is met by changes, not all of them need to be discerning. Consider trying a hearty new recipe, sending holiday cards, or even making holiday-themed crafts! New traditions are created at life's most unexpected moments.

## Make Merry, but in Moderation

Mental wellbeing and physical health go hand-in-hand. There is nothing as enticing as a colorful row of holiday cookies and treats, but excessive sugar and carbohydrates can zap your energy and then your spirits—especially if combined with too much alcohol. Stick to healthy eating patterns during the holidays, emphasizing lean meats, leafy vegetables, whole grains and fruit. Avoid driving after indulging and be aware of any medications that may be contraindicated with alcohol.

## The Spice is Right

Healthy spiced nuts and other "sweet" gifts are a two-fold opportunity to gift a loved one or indulge yourself without sabotaging special dietary needs. [VNSNY's 'Caregiver's Cookbook'](#) has some tasty and fulfilling suggestions!

## Do Good, Feel Good

The pandemic has created all kinds of need in New York City, from health care to economic support. In the spirit of giving, consider using the money you would usually spend on holiday gathering to donate to a charity dear to your heart, or donating food, toys, or clothing to local drives. During this time of crisis, every act of charity goes even further, and there is no warmer feeling than doing something good.

## Close from Afar

The holidays can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, and amid the isolation created by the COVID-19 crisis, this loneliness has become even more common. Sending text messages or emails is a great way to stay connected, but phone or video calls add a more realistic and personal flair to your communication. While hugging a computer screen just isn't the same, consider inviting a group of friends or family members into a video call on Zoom for a bit of holiday cheer. Or perhaps you'd like to call a friend you haven't spoken to in months to catch each other up on your year. And when in doubt, remember that in the city that never sleeps, no one is ever truly alone.

## Appreciate You

Holidays can be stressful, and it just might be impossible to accomplish all the things you set out to do. If you don't get your handmade Christmas cards out this year or can't seem to finish knitting your nephew a new sweater, cut yourself some slack. The holidays often cause us to set unrealistic expectations and get down on ourselves if we can't meet them. Give yourself some credit—this year has not been easy for anyone. Take a moment to remind yourself of how far you've come and be grateful for the gifts in your life.

If you or someone you care about seems seriously anxious or depressed, it's time to get help. Remember to Ask, Listen and Get Help by calling [NYC WELL](#) at 1-888-692-9355.

Deirdré DeLeo, is the Associate Director of Programs and Clinical Operations with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York and its [Community Mental Health Services](#) division. For more information please visit [www.VNSNY.org](http://www.VNSNY.org) or call (800) 675-0391.