

CONNECTIONS

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Eating Disorders and the Holiday Season

By Dawn Delgado LMFT, CEDS-S, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

Do's and don'ts for creating safe spaces.

We have undeniably entered the holiday season. From pumpkins and turkeys to menorahs and twinkly lights. Festive music, delicious scents, and holiday decorations create a spirited feeling all around. The irony is that studies have shown that depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns spike in 50-60 percent of persons affected by mental illness during the holidays. For individuals struggling with eating disorders, disordered eating, and body image issues, the nine-week stretch from Halloween to New Year's Eve can also be quite stressful and intense. Here are some tips for those who love someone struggling with eating disorder issues to support him/her/them through the holiday season.

- **Do not...** make casual comments about your loved one's physical body related to weight or size. If you haven't seen your loved one in some time, it is easy to fall into the trap of commenting on weight gain or weight loss. This can be done in the right setting at the right time; however, the wrong setting or wrong time can feel threatening and triggering to someone struggling with an eating disorder.
- **Do...** let him/her/them know you would like to talk about your concerns in private at a convenient time. Create a safe space for the conversation and lead with your love and concern. It may be helpful to start with an intention for the conversation. When you have created a safe space, share your concern directly. Pause to listen and hear their struggles. "I love you. My intention is to create a safe space for us to have a conversation about my concern for you."
- **Do not...** casually comment on, critique, or nag about their eating or food choices. Statements like "Just eat some turkey" or "Why don't you skip the dessert?" never cured an eating disorder. Eating disorders are only about food and weight on the surface. When you peel back the layers, eating disorders are about deep challenges in tolerating difficult feelings. Comments that oversimplify or minimize the depth of the individual's experience leave them feeling invalidated and unseen. These are just as silly as "Why don't you just cheer up?" to someone with clinical depression. Comments like this only highlight that you don't understand and will put you in the "unsafe person" category.
- **Do...** focus on support and coping. Statements like, "I am here for you when you are ready." "I noticed you struggling. How can I support you?" Even something like, "I'd like to be a safe person for you if you struggle with... (the meal, after the meal,

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Season's Greetings City Employees!

What a unique holiday season we find ourselves in the middle of.

We hope you are finding creative ways to follow your favorite traditions.

We hope you are finding innovative ways to be together that keep everyone safe.

We hope you are finding things to be grateful for despite some significant losses this year.

If you are struggling, please give us a call.

If you are hanging in there, we'll see you on the other side of 2020!

~ The EAP Team



The best part of life is not just surviving, but thriving with passion and compassion and humor and style and generosity and kindness.



- Maya Angelou



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the family, grandma's comments about your body)." Ask what you can do to support, then... listen.

- **Do not...** call him/her/they out at the table or in front of others about their behaviors. They are struggling enough without being in the spotlight or on the spot. Attention to their struggles will feel like an attack.
- **Do...** pull them aside if you notice your loved one is struggling with eating disorder symptoms. Let him/her/they know you are concerned and that you love them. Family dinners on Thanksgiving or other holidays that center around food can be terribly triggering and anxiety-producing for individuals struggling with Anorexia, Bulimia, and other eating disorders. They are likely battling demons in their heads around food choices and acutely aware of the family's focus on their eating. A client once shared, "Imagine standing naked on a stage in front of your high school class with people giving you feedback about what they see. This is what someone with an eating disorder will be feeling at the Thanksgiving dinner table."
- **Do not...** respond in a way that can be perceived as attacking or judging if you fear your loved one is purging or using laxatives. You will be categorized in the "not helpful" box and risk being cut off. So do not ignore this behavior but be cautious not to shame your loved one.
- **Do...** make yourself available to listen. Share your concerns, as discussed above, and educate yourself on the risks of these behaviors. Educate your loved one about the risks of purging and laxative abuse and suggest visiting a professional for lab work to check electrolyte levels. Eating disorders are dangerous and have a variety of medical complications that are not apparent by someone's size or shape.
- **Do not...** lecture and try to approach the situation as if you know what they are experiencing and you know how to fix it. Eating disorders are not as simple as fixing the food piece or fixing the weight. They stem from a deep psychological discord that needs to be addressed by a multidisciplinary team of professionals. A well rounded multidisciplinary team will include a trained medical doctor, a CEDS therapist, a registered dietitian, preferably a CEDRD, a support group, and potentially a psychiatrist who understands eating disorders.
- **Do...** have some resources prepared, like the contact for a CEDS and CEDRD, as well as a free support group. CEDS is a Certified Eating Disorder Specialist and CEDRD is a Certified Eating Disorder Registered Dietitian. **Center For Discovery** has free virtual support groups. Encourage, listen, support, and provide direct communication until you get your loved one into the hands of a specialist.

So, while the turkey is cooking and the holiday music is playing, let's not forget that this can be a triggering and challenging time of year for many individuals struggling with mental health issues. Let's support our loved ones who might be struggling this holiday season.

Dawn Delgado is the founder of Inspire Evolve and is a certified eating disorder specialist, trauma specialist (EMDR Certified), and marriage and family therapist practicing in LA and Texas. Learn more at www.inspireevolvecounseling.com.



Navigating the holidays this year if you have an eating disorder

This is a unique holiday season filled with uncertainty due to the pandemic, politics, and civil unrest. Regardless of your choices this holiday season, one thing that still remains true is that this season is filled with celebrations centered around food. For individuals with an eating disorder this may create additional stress and anxiety. Whether meeting with loved ones in person or virtually, below are some tips to alleviate the stress:

- Create a plan to cope with this holiday season
 - » Be aware of your stressors and triggers. Are there things about this holiday season that exacerbate your stress response? Make a plan to cope with these stressors and symptoms.
- Set healthy boundaries
 - » Think in advance about how you will address issues of diet or weight-related talk.
 - » Do what you are comfortable with, it's okay to say no to family gatherings and even to leave virtual gatherings early.
- Rely on your support system
 - » Holiday seasons are generally stressful, rely on people you trust to get you through this time. Even if they cannot be physically with you, they may just be a video or phone call away.
- Practice self-care
 - » Make time to take care of yourself both physically and emotionally.
 - » This may be a great time to practice mindfulness and shift what you are focusing on.
- Be compassionate with yourself
 - » 2020 has been rough! Be kind to yourself, you are doing the best you can.

For more positive coping strategies to get through COVID-19, read **COVID-19: Coping in Isolation with an Eating Disorder**.

Sobriety Online: Managing Recovery in a Virtual World

By Constance Scharff Ph.D., *Psychology Today* (Used with the author's permission)

It's possible to recover from addiction and thrive, even during a pandemic.

Covid 19 has changed the landscape of everything we know, including how mental health and addiction recovery are managed. With 12-step and other support groups conducted mostly online, it can be difficult for people newer to recovery, as well as some old-timers, to connect to the help they need. Here are several actions to take to access the assistance needed to be sober in a virtual world.

Attend virtual 12-step meetings: In order to find virtual 12-step meetings, one need only go online and search for Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or any other group in the nearest city or town. This will yield a website that will have instructions for accessing online meetings. Because online meetings are available in every time zone, there are actually more meetings accessible day or night than has traditionally been the case. If it's the middle of the night where you are, search for a meeting in London, England or Melbourne, Australia. You're sure to find welcoming people to help you.

Call people: Most support groups will offer a phone list of members. If you like the way a person shares about their recovery, call them after the meeting and talk to them. This is welcome and a good way to build a support system. Connection is critical to recovery.

Meditation apps: There are many apps, and even some online groups, that teach and support a meditation practice. Meditation can bring a sense of calm and connection. When part of a daily practice and used in conjunction with support groups and a support system, meditation can be effective in decreasing urges to drink/use and give a sense of well-being.

Volunteer: Called "service work" in 12-step programs, helping others is one way to make meaning, get out of your own damaging thoughts, and contribute to making a better community. While some service work is sobriety-related, other efforts may involve community service or social activism. Some volunteer activities can be done online or at home. Foster a dog. Help people register to vote. Raise money for a charity that's important to you. There are many ways to be of service to others.

Telehealth: Treatment for mental health issues can be done safely and effectively from home. Whether you had mental health concerns before stay-at-home orders or developed them because of the isolation of being at home, find a therapist and start talking about the issues. Many insurance companies are now covering telehealth visits for mental health. **NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)** has resources to help, as does *Psychology Today*.

Online groups: There are organizations that are providing free or low-cost online services. These groups offer meditation, breath work, music, and other forms of therapeutic connection. A virtual search can put you in touch with practitioners who are providing special services to those in need during the pandemic. Become part of one of these communities.

Focus on what you can control: There are parts of our lives over which we do have a fair bit of control. What are you doing to sleep well? Are you exercising? How is your nutrition? Are you bathing and getting dressed? The more you do to maintain a healthy routine, the better you will feel, especially if you are taking care of your basic needs in a healthy and responsible way.

Speak up: If you need help, ask for it. If you are struggling with addiction or mental health issues, let people know, and keep letting people know until you find the help and support you need. Talk about what's bothering you. Friends or family may not be able to change what's going on, but they can give you space to feel what needs to be felt, so that you can develop healthy coping mechanisms and develop resiliency.

Go to treatment: If you are unable to get or stay sober in the relative isolation that the pandemic has caused, residential treatment is an option. Many treatment facilities across the country have room at present. Treatment facilities are doing everything in their power to keep Covid-19 out of facilities through screenings and safety protocols. Now is a great time to get help in a residential treatment program.

You do not have to be alone. There are online and face-to-face resources to help you get and stay sober. Use them.



Substance Use during the Holidays

With all the stressors we are facing in today's world, it is easy to rely on alcohol or other substances to cope. Whether you have a substance use disorder or not, the holiday season tends to increase substance use due to stress, isolation, grief, lack of social support, and family dynamics. Below are some tips to get through this holiday season:

- **Self-Awareness**
 - » Know your stressors and your stress response. Make sure you are listening to your body and what you need, for instance, whether you are hungry or tired.
- **Make a Plan**
 - » Decide what you are going to do this holiday season and how you will be handling tough situations.
 - » Make sure to decide how much you are planning to drink or if you will stay sober, plan accordingly.
 - » Use distractions to your benefit, especially if you will be alone this holiday season. For instance, find movies to watch or plan virtual meetings.
- **Don't Forget to Eat**
 - » Low blood sugar can make you irritable and increase your impulsivity to drink.
- **Increase your Endorphins**
 - » Satisfy your alcohol craving with something else, for instance sweet treats or exercise can increase endorphins.
- **Non-Alcoholic Alternatives**
 - » If you decide to spend the holidays with others, talk to the host about non-alcoholic alternatives or bring your own non-alcoholic drinks.
- **Rely on your Support System**
 - » Reach out to loved ones you trust. Open up about your substance use and help them support you in the limits you set for yourself.
- **Use Resources Available to You**
 - » If you need additional support, seek professional help such as counseling or attend meetings:
 - **Madison Area Alcoholics Anonymous**
 - **Smart Recovery Program**

Helping Children Cope with COVID during the Holidays

By Julia Allen, LCSW, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)

How you can help your child build resilience during these stressful times.

"My friend at school told the class Santa's not coming this year because he's in a high-risk age category for COVID."

"We were going to visit Grandpa out of state, but I don't want to get him sick."

"I've been looking forward to my senior year homecoming dance since I was a freshman, and I'm devastated that it was cancelled."

These are all sentiments recently echoed to me in sessions by several of my young clients (details have been changed to protect confidentiality). As a child therapist, promoting healthy, flexible coping mechanisms in response to life's stressors is a common treatment goal. Resilience helps us bounce back from life's unavoidable bumps and bruises, and research shows that children who are more resilient have stronger cognitive skills, emotion regulation, parent relationships, and school engagement.

In 2020, our kids' resilience has truly been tested, and this upcoming holiday season will likely bring its own set of challenges. For many children, family traditions around this time are a staple: this is when families gather, memories are made, and much-needed breaks from school are enjoyed. The ongoing pandemic has impacted nearly all spheres of our children's lives, and the holiday season is not immune. This year will undoubtedly look different in terms of your family's plans, rituals, and celebrations, but fortunately, there's a lot parents can do to nurture resilience in their kids.

1. To the extent possible, promote predictability and a sense of normalcy.

For most children—and adults—2020 has been a year of unpredictability, where the unimaginable becomes reality, and the world around us looks bizarrely different. For children, these changes can be very scary. Like all of us, they need routine and a sense of predictability to help "ground" them. Our brains don't do well with persistent lack of structure, ongoing chaos, and continuous change—it overtaxes our decision-making and executive functioning, leaving us fatigued, irritable, and disconnected.

While much of the current situation is out of your control as a parent, there's actually a lot you can do within the "sphere of influence" you have in your child's life. We all exist within multiple systems. And while you can't control the macrosystem, you do have the power to influence your child's microsystem.

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So what does this look like for promoting predictability during the holidays? Keep the family traditions alive that you can still do, and forge creative new ones. Can't make hot cocoa in person with grandma like you always do? Have the kids assemble an ingredients kit, ask grandma to send over some instructions, and Zoom her in so she can virtually observe and "rate" how closely her grandchildren follow her cherished family recipe. Don't be afraid to get silly, unconventional, and a little weird. Ask for—and really consider!—your child's thoughts on how to keep traditions alive this holiday year. Children love to give their opinions. And if by doing so, they end up directly influencing the creation of a new family holiday ritual, then that's a wonderful holiday memory—pandemic or not.

2. Deliberately practice gratitude and emphasize what's going well.

It sounds trite, but the science doesn't lie—research has proven that deliberately practicing gratitude increases your dopamine and serotonin levels, two neurotransmitters heavily involved in regulating our happiness levels.

In 1949, renowned neuropsychologist Donald Hebb, Ph.D., famously coined the expression "neurons that fire together wire together." If you think of the brain and its neural networks as highways, the highways that are more frequently traveled will become more of your brain's "go-to" routes. In contrast, the paths less traveled become used less frequently. So it's in our child's best interests to cultivate "neural gratitude highways." This is a fun task that can be personalized to your child's interests and even undertaken as a family! Gratitude journals, expressing one thing each family member is grateful for over a meal, or writing thank-you notes are all activities that cultivate an appreciation for the positives.

3. Let them feel their feelings.

Emotion coaching is a hugely popular discipline strategy for a reason—shouting and power struggles go down, and compliance goes up. This approach by John Gottman, Ph.D., emphasizes helping your kids connect to their emotions and learn to label and regulate them, especially in times of stress.

While the effects aren't quite as immediate as yelling at them to go to their room because you've already answered their question four times, they're significantly longer lasting. Emotion coaching teaches our kids the skills they need in order to self-regulate, which is critical during the teen years when they're self-navigating through the emotional roller coaster that is adolescence. Research has shown that kids raised with this parenting style tend to do better in school and create stronger peer friendships than their counterparts. In short, emotion coaching supports resilience, which is key to helping your children cope this holiday season.

In a nutshell, emotion coaching has three elements:

- 1. Validate their feelings:** Show them you really, truly get their emotions. "You're really upset that your school isn't doing their usual holiday show. That makes perfect sense—I know you've been looking forward to playing the same role your brother had. I'd be mad, too."
- 2. Set a limit:** If needed, after an unacceptable behavior. "In this house, no matter how mad we get, we do not call adults bad names."
- 3. Problem-solve:** Get curious and elicit your child's ideas on how to find solutions. "What do you think could make this better? What a cool idea, for us to put on a family holiday show at home!"

Again, although this appears on the surface to be harder and more time-consuming than just giving your child "the look" or raising your voice to make them settle down, this parenting hack will ultimately save you so much time and energy. Take an honest step back: In this COVID era of distance learning, working from home, and Zoom fatigue, how many minutes of your day do you spend negotiating, repeating commands, or reiterating house rules to your kids? Emotion coaching can change these patterns, helping you parent more effectively and allowing your kids to feel heard—a win-win.

These are hard times for all of us, and the holidays often bring trials and tribulations all their own. Focusing on what you can control in your child's environment, accepting what you can't, and giving yourself grace as a parent can help you get through the season with your wellness and sanity intact.

Julia Allen, LCSW is a licensed therapist in La Jolla who specializes in providing therapy to children, teens, and their families. For more information, please visit her website at www.juliaallentherapy.com.



The Problem with New Year's Resolutions: What to Do Instead

By Peg Streep, **Psychology Today** (Used with the author's permission)



Better strategies for an improved you in the New Year

Yes, it's that time again—the turning of the page, the stretch of a brand-new year, and, hopefully, a whole new you, right? Well, I happen to be a believer in the whole new page thing, especially as it applies to the beginning of a month or a change in season because you can psyche yourself into gearing up and getting off whatever hamster wheel you happen to find yourself on. But why is the New Year's thing just a bust for most people? Shouldn't a New Year energize the hell out of all of us?

Well, yes but no.

It's been thirty years since John Norcross and Dominic Vangarelli conducted a study of what happens to all that New Year's resolution-making and discovered—surprise, surprise!—that most of us are abject failures at it. At one week's time, 77% of those questioned were still hanging in but only 55% were left standing at the end of a month. Two years later, only 19% had actually succeeded.

Let's mosey on down the road and see why that is precisely.

What's really motivating you? That's the question

Most of our resolutions aren't things we actually want to do deep down in our hearts but things we feel we ought to do. Intrinsic goals—ones that reflect our inner selves and our truest aspirations—tend to be those we actually set our minds to achieving; studies show that people display more resilience when they're thwarted in their progress when a goal is intrinsic, in contrast to one which is extrinsic. Extrinsic goals are those we may go after but we are motivated to achieve them because they're set by other people (our parents, spouses, or friends), the culture, or society as a whole. It's not often that I love a quotation from scientific research but here's my own fav on the difference between intrinsic goals and extrinsic ones, courtesy of Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, who note that extrinsic motivation is “a pale and impoverished (if powerful) form of motivation that contrasts with intrinsic motivation.”

Seen from that point of view, the key question is what lies behind your resolve? Are you doing it for you or for someone else? Because you want to or because you think you should?

You're being unrealistic (and impatient too)

Resolutions get us focused—like crossing 42nd Street in Manhattan without getting run over—and not in a good way either. The likelihood is that your resolution is either unrealistic (“I'll lose 20 pounds in a month!” “I'll stop over-reacting to my sister's annoying behavior by Valentine's Day!” “I am going to step up my game and get a way better job by March!”) or the timeline is way too short or, as in these examples, both. Resolutions tend to have us looking for magic wands and even when we can't see them, we tend to believe in them.

You're pleasing or appeasing someone (and that someone could be you)

These are the worst of the extrinsic goals—the ones that are supposed to satisfy or placate others. Your boyfriend is always complaining that you're not game to try something new so you decide you're going to do a personality do-over and become the woman who's willing to try stand-up, sky-diving, or something else that really interests you not at all. Or it might be your self-critical self you're appeasing—the voice in your head that tells you that you're fat and unappealing—and that motivates you to start dieting on the 1st of the year as you always do. Of course, your ultimate failure to keep the weight off just adds a bit more authority to the voice the next time out.

So, this year, abandon the pack, ignore all the articles about resolutions, and focus on setting some goals for the coming year instead.

5 Things You Can Do to Set Goals

Get rid of pie-in-the-sky thinking and pipe dreams because if jumpstarting your life is what you want to do, it is eminently doable. The old year doesn't have to phase into the new year unless you want it to and the best way to do that is to become the driver of the car that is you.

1. Plot and plan

Research shows that just thinking about setting a goal isn't as good as writing your goals down; by writing, you're using a different part of the brain. Prioritize your goals, keeping in mind that multi-tasking is largely a myth. Make sure that you actually have the ability or the skillset to achieve your goals; setting the bar really high isn't a reliable motivator unless you have what you need in hand.

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Divide your goals into short term and long term on either a piece of paper or on your computer screen; you may well discover that a long-term goal such as finding a new job or switching industries requires you to set and achieve interim goals such as learning to code, taking a management course, or any other training you might need.

Continue to ask yourself if your goals are realistic.

2. Make sure your goals are congruent

You'd be surprised how many people fail at goals because they're not paying attention to whether goals are in conflict. It seems obvious enough that if you've set the goal of being promoted at work but you also want to spend more time at home with your family, you're setting yourself up for failure in one arena or the other.

Think about the time and effort you will have to invest in achieving your goal and whether, in fact, that's going to contribute to your ability to thrive in the short-term or will create other problems.

3. Anticipate setbacks and opportunities (and bolster your resilience)

Research shows that using "If/then" thinking encourages us to be more flexible and creative when it comes to problem solving; it's what Peter Gollwitzer has called "implementation intention." Basically, your mindset is "If X happens, then I'll do Y." This has you thinking proactively and forces you to pay attention to situational cues; it can be used in almost every situation too. Let's say you are trying to smooth out what has been a bumpy relationship with a friend; you begin by thinking, "If she's open to talking, then I'll talk to her about how we might resolve our differences." Needless to say, if she appears not to be open to talking, you will reframe and wait for a better moment.

Sticking to a single plan is a terrible idea so keep using "If/then" thinking. Your ability to quit and pivot is absolutely key to success.

4. Be prepared to abandon ship and set a new course

Commitment is a part of goal-setting but you can't be so wedded to Plan A that you lose the ability to be flexible and accommodate a change in strategy. Cultural mythology preaches that we must always be persistent—yes, the Little Engine and all of that—but the reality is that humans are actually hardwired to persist even when things aren't going well. Different biases in thoughts such as the sunk cost fallacy—focusing on how much time, energy, or capital we have invested in something that's going south rather than thinking about greener pastures—tend to keep us stuck and persisting, rather than moving on as we need to. Once we've chosen a course, we're also easily swayed by the power of intermittent reinforcement and often see things more positively than we should. Always have a Plan B in your back pocket and be prepared to bail if you need to.

5. Savor your progress and quell self-criticism

Do set a realistic schedule for whatever it is you want to achieve. I would love nothing more than to be able to write a book in six months, for example, but if I were to set that as my goal—knowing that I'm not a first-draft writer and that my prose always needs tinkering with—I would fail miserably. A new you isn't going to show up on January 1st so you need to anticipate with self-knowledge so that you can kick-start your progress. If going to an exercise or cycling class always makes you feel lousy and self-conscious, that's probably not going to change; why don't you start taking long walks instead? If time management is always a problem for you, factor that into whatever goals you're setting; again, there's no benefit in self-sabotage.

Most important, be patient. It takes time to achieve important goals, especially changes in behavior.

These observations are drawn from my book, **Quitting—Why We Fear It and Why We Shouldn't—in Life, Love, and Work.** (Da Capo Press, 2015).

*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

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