

Coping with the Holidays

NEDIC Staff, Maria Jacobsen, and with thanks to our volunteers

The holiday season is often a very stressful period for individuals with food and weight preoccupation issues. The emphasis on spending time with family and celebrating with food can be very distressing. This article will focus on exploring ways in which individuals may make this time less difficult. It is not an exhaustive list, but may get you started on generating ideas that are adaptive to your own situation.

You don't need a crystal ball to be able to predict some things about family and friends! Based on past experience and an understanding of the people close to you, you may be able to avoid or cope constructively with uncomfortable situations.

The holiday season is a time when you may find yourself overwhelmed by commitments. It is easy to overlook your own needs while fulfilling others' expectations.

Predict high stress times and places

- Plan which events you will attend and which you won't attend.
- Plan to have restorative time for your own needs: Go to a movie, unplug the phone, or take a walk. Visit a trusted friend. Buy yourself a present.
- Create a list of friends and crisis lines to call if you need support. Keep it handy.
- Plan to do volunteer work or join an interest or support group if you are without many friends or family as the holiday season may be a time of loneliness, emptiness, or pain.

For example, make time available for pleasurable activities between visits to family. Say that you will attend one big family gathering and make plans for other fun alternatives or smaller, more manageable celebrations. Find a listing of local activities and join in those that appeal to you.

Predict which people might make you most uncomfortable, and in which ways

- Plan as to whether you want to, or can, avoid these people.
- Plan appropriate ways of excusing yourself from their company.
- Plan ways in which to shift the focus of attention from you.

For example, X and Z always demand that you sit next to them. It makes you feel as though they are monitoring or restricting your behaviour. Say that you will only spend a few minutes with them as you want to visit with Y; say you will sit with them a little later, but you first need/want to do something else. There is no need to apologize for satisfying a need or desire that you may have.

Predict what people might say to you that would lead you to feel uncomfortable

- Plan and practice verbal responses.
- Plan to set boundaries ahead of time: Ask that people not comment on your body, appearance or eating habits.
- Plan ways of desensitizing yourself to the comments.

For example, “You eat like a bird. Come on, have another helping... You need to gain weight.” Response: “Thanks for your concern, but I won’t get into a debate about my weight. Please leave it up to me to decide how many helpings I eat.”

Use coping statements:

- *Before events: “I am within my rights to say no.”*
- *During events: “I can handle this.”*
- *After events: “I did... very well” or “I can see that X is upset; however, it was important that I take care of myself.”*

Remind yourself that you are a worthy individual and are entitled to respectful behaviour.

Put the value of the other person’s position and power in your life into perspective.

Predict negative thoughts that you might have during the season

- Plan how you could challenge these thoughts; Try to be realistic about events and your own behaviours.
- Plan and practice alternative, positive thoughts. Write them down.

For example, you might think, “She gave me a bigger gift than I gave her, she must think I am cheap.” It is important to think in a way which would be more realistic, helpful and adaptive. A challenge to the above thought could be: “People will understand that I can’t afford expensive gifts but give thought to what they would

enjoy.” A way to expand on the use of coping statements is to look at events as having three parts: before, during and after.

You can prepare three sets of statements:

- Before: “I’m entitled to...”
- During: “I can handle this.”
- After: “I did... very well.”

Complimenting yourself on your actions may be difficult. It may help to focus on individual steps you have made. It is important to come up with coping statements that work for you.

Predict how you might respond to the thought of a banquet of food

- Plan to consistently eat three meals a day, and snacks in between as needed, to help curb urges to binge.
- Plan ways to feel more comfortable around food. Be realistic in your goals. Dispel myths of “good” and “bad” foods. Try not to count calories. Think of how you can distract yourself if you find yourself counting calories.
- Plan to allow yourself to eat pleasurable foods and “extras.” This is socially and psychologically healthy!
- Plan for possible discomfort around feelings of fullness: distract yourself by engaging in a joyful activity, e.g., singing.
- Plan to be compassionate towards yourself. If you binge or purge, remember this is a behaviour that will decrease in regularity with healthier attitudes and eating behaviour rather than punishing yourself for relapses.
- Plan to hide or throw away your scale to avoid sabotaging yourself.

For example, you may have a close friend with whom you can review strategies for remaining in control during stressful occasions at which food is a focal point. Strategies that may be helpful include deep breathing techniques, holding on to a magical, comforting thought, or seeking out someone who is affirming of you.

For some people it is helpful to realize that the picture-book holiday scene is not a reality for everyone. Some cannot afford it, there are many single people who are not close to their families or do not have a family, and there are many families that do not fit into the nuclear family model. Don’t blame yourself for family/friendship conflicts. People are no different during the holidays than any other time of the year. Remember that you are responsible only for your own actions and for taking care of yourself.

Places you may want to explore for things to do during the holidays

- Neighbourhood and community centres
- Parks and recreation department
- City hall
- College and university campuses
- Community newspapers and websites
- Social media, blogs, and message boards

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