Holiday planning during COVID-19

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, holidays, special events, picnics and celebrations have changed dramatically. For many people, this is the first time they have been confronted with empty chairs at the table because loved ones cannot or are unwilling to attend family gatherings. Cherished traditions and religious events may have been canceled due to the virus, with no clear end in sight to social distancing restrictions. People who live alone or far from family, or who have lost loved ones, may find holidays especially difficult.

These changes can trigger a variety of emotions, from grief to guilt or anger. Holidays may not be the same, however, there are various ways to find peace and moments of joy in the midst of the sadness and sense of loss that we may sometimes feel.

Here are some suggestions for handling holiday planning during the pandemic:

• Think about changing your family traditions to adapt to social distancing. If hosting a big dinner, meeting up with friends and attending holiday parties are no longer possible, consider virtual alternatives to keep in touch with important people in your life.

• Follow the CDC’s recommendations when organizing a gathering at your home. If possible, hold outdoor events with a small group of local friends and family members, make sure everyone wears a mask, maintain social distance and do not share food or drinks.

• If you have lost a loved one, honor their memory with a special ornament, wreath or centerpiece, or perhaps a candle lit during a holiday. If you can, take part in a voluntary activity that your loved one used to do.

• If in-person religious services or events have changed see if you can still participate via televised services, video chats and online prayer meetings.

Most importantly, take care of your mental health. The pandemic has increased stress and anxiety levels for many people. If you feel overwhelmed, try to replace negative thoughts by focusing on the things you can control. Building your resilience skills can help protect your mental health.

Try these tips to use your strengths and build resilience:

• Keep connected by staying in touch with positive and supportive people, even if you cannot see them in person.

• Recharge your batteries by allowing yourself time every day to do something you like. Taking time to engage in a pleasant activity or hobby will give you a positive lift.

• Keep your sense of humor by seeking out things that make you laugh.

• Practice gratitude by focusing on the things you are grateful for every day liked loved ones and nature.

Help is available. Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Sources:


The loss of normalcy: Coping with grief and uncertainty during COVID-19

COVID-19 has disrupted our lives in many ways. The stress of social distancing and loss of routine, compounded with health and job concerns, has caused grief and anxiety levels to increase. What we thought of as “normal” is in transition, and we need to redefine how to cope with these changes.

Reasons people feel grief
Grief is a natural feeling accompanying any kind of loss. Typically, grief is associated with losing a loved one to death. With COVID-19, people are experiencing grief related to the loss of routines, livelihoods and relationships. While it is always good advice to be thankful for what we have, it is also important not to minimize the pandemic or its associated losses. Also challenging is that we do not know how long we’ll be impacted by COVID-19. With no clear end in sight, feelings of grief can intensify and make people feel less in control.

Grief shows itself in different ways
It’s perfectly normal to grieve when you can’t celebrate your child’s birthday, your friend’s graduation, your honeymoon or other important life events. It’s important to know that we all grieve differently. Some people may experience feelings more intensely than other people. We shouldn’t make judgments about how someone grieves. There is nothing wrong with having emotions; it is a common response to loss. When we don’t express our feelings, they can get stuck in our bodies, causing physical illness and/or depression.

Listed below are some of the common emotions people experience when grieving, and they may be heightened because of the pandemic.

- Shock, disbelief and denial
- Anger
- Fear
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Anxiety and depression
- Acceptance and hope
- Relief

Complicated grief
In the current environment, any losses experienced now have additional layers of complexity and depth. Likewise, if we’ve had previous traumas from earlier stages in our lives, the stress of the pandemic might bring up past life experiences that were painful. It’s important to be sensitive to those potential triggers.

COVID-19 has brought on many situations: not being able to say goodbye, to have a funeral service, to grieve because of taking care of others, dreams put on hold, etc. We don’t have the same levels of support due to the quarantine, such as being able to see loved ones and friends. For these reasons and others, it is important to develop coping skills to help get us through this difficult time.

Understanding grief
Part of what gives comfort during challenging times is understanding the healing process.

- Grief can be an ongoing process. It can take on different forms and meanings and with time; the intensity and feelings of grief do change.
- Grief doesn’t mean you obsessively think about what has happened. It is important to allow yourself to deal with the feelings, but obsessively thinking about the pain and fear will only make the feelings worse and can trigger anxiety.
• Grief does not mean “forgetting.” If you have experienced a significant loss or you have missed out on a long-planned event, it is okay to think about who or what you will miss. Part of the grieving process involves keeping your loved ones and/or cherished dreams with you emotionally, as they are still a part of you even if they are no longer a physical reality.

• Grief involves growth. Whether it is coping with the death of a loved one, going through a traumatic event or dealing with the loss of a job, no one chooses these experiences. Working through grief and sorting through intense emotions can help you learn new things about yourself and discover new strengths that can result in emotional growth and maturity. In this way, loss sometimes yields gifts.

How to help yourself

• Build a virtual support system. In the era of social distancing, be creative about how to give and receive support. It’s important to turn to friends, co-workers or family members for support. People like to be of service. Giving and receiving are part of the same equation and benefit all.

• Focus on hope. We all have times when we feel hopeless. Being hopeful helps you realize that we all have tough times and that those times will pass, as will the feelings associated with them.

• Take care of yourself. The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you also feel better emotionally. When you feel sad, do not be influenced by how others think you should grieve. It’s important to feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It’s okay to be angry, cry or not cry. It’s also okay to laugh, find moments of joy and let go when we’re ready.

• Practice gratitude. Sometimes when people are in the midst of loss, they have deep moments of gratitude for what they once had. Practicing gratitude trains our minds to change our thinking and to see the glass as half full.

How to help others

• What to say. It can feel awkward when conversing with someone going through grief. You may wonder what to say or not say; however, don’t avoid the topic or be afraid to bring it up. It’s not helpful to say things like, “There’s a reason for everything,” or “I know how you feel.” Instead, you can offer a simple expression of sorrow, such as “I’m sorry you’re going through this,” or “I don’t know how you feel, but I’d like to help in any way I can.”

• Listen. Sometimes the best thing to say is nothing. Or very little. A grieving person may need to tell their story again and again as part of the process. Be willing to listen without judgment. A good rule to follow is to listen 80 percent of the time and talk the other 20 percent. Your presence can be comforting to a grieving loved one, and you don’t have to do anything special. Often, grieving people just don’t want to be alone.

• Avoid giving advice. Unless someone specifically asks for your advice, it isn’t your place to give it. Grieving people need to do things in their own unique way.

• Don’t take things personally. When people are in profound emotional pain, they can cycle through a whole range of feelings, including irritability and anger. If a grieving person snaps at you, or doesn’t feel like engaging, don’t take it personally. It’s not about you.

• Offer to help. Many times, the grieving person does not want to burden others by asking for help. Don’t wait for them to ask. Instead, offer to help by bringing over dinner, shopping, gardening, etc. During the quarantine, there might be a limit to what you can physically do to help, but you can still take on tasks for the individual to relieve some burdens.

Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Sources:
10 pandemic coping tips for adults

While the pandemic may be causing you and your loved ones feelings of anxiety and apprehension, now is a good time to look for reasons to be happy. Practice these tips to nurture yourself, improve your mood and help others.

1. **Be kind.** Call your friends and neighbors. Maintain social distancing, but smile to all the grocery workers who are keeping the shelves stocked. Ask an elderly neighbor if they need anything. An act of kindness boosts serotonin, a natural antidepressant in your brain, in both you and others.

2. **Be thankful.** Don’t rush through your daily interactions on autopilot. Slow down and notice when someone is kind to you, even in the smallest way, and show them your appreciation. When you practice thankfulness, you become more positive; that helps others feel good too.

3. **Deepen your connections:** Share your feelings about this experience with those closest to you. Encourage each other to make the best of this moment in time, and come up with a game plan to support each other moving forward.

4. **Move your body.** Exercise is vital to maintaining physical and mental health. Get your heart pumping by taking a walk in your neighborhood, going on a hike in nature or using an app for a guided training or yoga session. If you do go outside for a walk, maintain social distancing.

5. **Write down your thoughts.** Keeping a journal is a powerful way to get perspective. Clarifying your thoughts and feelings on paper helps you get to know yourself better and release the stresses of daily life.

6. **Meditate.** All you need to do is sit quietly for a few minutes, breathe deeply and let your mind relax. Meditation alleviates anxiety and helps you get in touch with your inner self, helping you face the world in a centered and focused way. Find free guided meditation sessions online.

7. **Determine what is really bothering you.** Vague worries are harder to manage because they are all jumbled together. Try to get clear on what you are specifically concerned about. Finding the root of the worry helps you figure out what to do about it.

8. **Play games.** Engaging in a game with others online, or even by yourself on your phone, helps you take your mind off other things. Give yourself permission to have some fun.

9. **Dine well.** Have fun with food. Make your favorite recipes. Set the table with your finest dishes. Cook a meal with others. If you live alone, share pictures with friends for fun.

10. **Remind yourself that this will pass.** Try and come to terms with what you can’t control, and focus on what you can do to move through this time in a positive way. Draw on skills you have used during other difficult times, and remember how those times eventually passed by.

Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.
Financial resilience during the pandemic

With stock market volatility and worrying headlines about how long the pandemic will last, it’s hard not to feel uneasy and question what the future holds. Consider these tips and resources to help you work through financial decisions and challenges that you may face in the weeks ahead.

Create a budget
Make a list of your regular monthly expenses, like rent, loan payments, utilities, food, etc. Compare that with your household’s take-home pay. If you are bringing home more money than your expenses, consider putting a bit of the extra to the side as a financial cushion. If your budget is more than you bring home each month, look for places you can cut to make ends meet. For help, visit www.consumer.gov.

Control your spending
Being isolated and bored at home can give you a lot of time to shop online. With so much uncertainty, it’s important to resist the urge to buy impulse items. Prioritize your most important financial obligations such as food, shelter and transportation first, and items like household décor and extra clothing last. If necessary, consider pausing automatic bill payments so you can control the payment timing until you are on better financial footing.

Contact your lenders (mortgage, car, rent, utilities, student loans, etc.)
If you are unable to work due to COVID-19 – you’ve fallen ill, your place of employment has temporarily closed, you have to stay home and take care of children or loved ones who are ill, etc. – you may not be able to pay your bills. Many lenders have set up exceptions, special accommodations and relief funds to support the public during this health crisis. Take advantage of them.

Reach out to your credit card company
Even if your credit card issuer has not formally released a statement of support, if you are at risk of missing a payment, it is worthwhile to contact the company to discuss your options. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) advises on its website (www.fdic.gov) that during a disaster, “Your creditors will likely work with you on a solution, but it’s important to contact them as soon as possible and explain your situation.” Late payments can hurt your credit score, and pile on extra charges and fees, so getting ahead of the issue will save you down the road.

Be aware of financial scams
If you receive a phone call, text message or email asking for your financial information in exchange for COVID-19 testing or medication, do not provide it. Unfortunately, fraudulent companies are taking advantage of people worried about COVID-19 and trying to steal their money and/or sensitive information by offering unproven cures. In particular, note that the World Health Organization (www.who.int) is warning about people posing as their representatives to get sensitive information and solicit donations through emails, phone calls, text messages and even fax messages.
Discuss finances with your partner or someone you trust

Concerns over money is at or near the top of the list of things that stress most of us out. It’s important to communicate with your partner and family about finances on a regular basis to understand your situation and agree on financial priorities. If necessary, consult with a financial professional.

Access community resources

- State and local human service agencies can connect you with public assistance programs such as food stamps or emergency financial funds, Medicaid, housing and the like. Learn more at hhs.gov/programs/social-services/index.html.
- The United Way has information on food banks, clothing closets, shelters, rent and utility assistance, support for older Americans and persons with disabilities, etc. Visit www.unitedway.org.
- Aunt Bertha is a social care network where you can search for services like medical care, food, job training, transportation and more, right in your area. Visit www.auntbertha.com.

Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

5 ways to support a loved one during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives in many ways. We find ourselves focused on the news, concerned for loved ones and adapting to changes in our home, work and social routines.

While it may be easier for some people to adapt to the “new normal” of isolation and social distancing, many others are feeling overwhelmed with emotions like sadness, depression and anxiety. If you are concerned about someone close to you, the following tips will help you support your loved one during this difficult time:

1. Treat your loved one with respect and dignity. Listen nonjudgmentally and respect their privacy and confidentiality. Offer consistent emotional support and understanding. In difficult times, we all need additional love and understanding. Remember to be empathetic, compassionate and patient.
2. Have realistic expectations and accept the person as they are. Tough times can make it harder than usual to do everyday activities like cleaning the house, paying bills or feeding the dog.
3. Provide practical help. Your support can have a huge impact. Offer to help with overwhelming tasks but be careful not to take over or encourage dependency. For example, offer to bring groceries over, mow the lawn or take a pet for a walk.
4. Encourage them to take care of their physical health by getting enough rest, staying hydrated, avoiding excessive amounts of caffeine or alcohol, and eating healthy foods when possible.
5. Give reassurance and information. Reassure them that it is appropriate to experience fear, sadness or anxiety during situations like this. Remind them that there is hope, help is available, and with time and treatment they can feel better. Visit your program website for helpful COVID-19 information and resources.

Help is available. Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Source:
Returning to work as COVID-19 continues

As states begin to reopen, millions of people who were working remotely or furloughed are being asked to return to their worksites. While federal agencies and states are providing guidelines on how to make workspaces safer for workers, many people are hesitant to return to on-site work for fear of falling ill.

Following these tips can help ease any anxiety you may have about transitioning back to your workplace:

Learn about new safety precautions
Your employer may have introduced new hygiene and protection measures such as hand washing, temperature measurement, mandatory social distancing or schedule changes to reduce contact with others. Workstations may have been reconfigured, and your company may be working with reduced staff. Understanding what is being done to keep your work environment safe and potential impacts on your job and work responsibilities can be reassuring.

Focus on being a team player
Returning to your workplace offers you an unprecedented opportunity to create new dynamics with your coworkers and develop new ways of working. Being isolated, you may have focused more on your individual performance, and your workplace culture likely changed. Now is the perfect time to reset expectations, learn more about how your team works together and build new team norms. Make a commitment to publicly celebrating the successes of your team.

Practice safe social interaction
Being able to talk face-to-face with your colleagues for the first time in a long time will be a tempting distraction. Socialization is important; catching up with coworkers can ease the stress about COVID-19. At the same time, restructured worksite layouts may make talking to coworkers harder; more people may have to move about to talk to their neighbors. Keep a safe distance from others whenever possible.

Pay attention to how you deal with stress
Everyone is affected by this crisis in one way or another. Stress is triggered by many things, including coming out of isolation, returning to work, losing a loved one or knowing someone who has fallen ill, and worrying about childcare or finances. Stress can cause a wide range of emotions including anxiety, anger, sadness, irritability, guilt or confusion. These emotions are normal, and you can go through one or more of them on any given day.

If you feel stressed, talk to people you trust about your worries or call your program. There may be times when you don’t want to talk; however, staying in touch with other people is critical to your emotional health. A supportive network can help you accept difficult emotions and manage them until they pass.
Take care of yourself
Body and mind are connected. When you feel good physically, you also feel better emotionally. Maintain a healthy lifestyle by sleeping well, exercising, drinking water and eating healthy meals.

Focus on being flexible and resilient
It will take time to get used to a potentially new work environment, so be patient with yourself. You have already had to adapt to changes during the pandemic; returning to work is yet another step. Everyone has the ability to build resilience and learn more about how to respond to adversity. Remember your strengths and successes over the past several months. Thinking about how you survived trials in the past will help you with today’s challenges. Work to stay positive. Maintaining an optimistic, hopeful attitude these days can be difficult, but optimism is a key element of resilience. No matter how bad things may be now, remember that they will not last forever.

It will take time to adjust to the new normal in the workplace. Staying organized and focusing on a task will help you get back into the swing of work.

Help is available. Your program is completely confidential and here to help you and your household members 24/7/365. No situation is too big or too small. Give us a call or visit your program website to get started.

Available now on LifeMart

Discounts to help you get through the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 is impacting nearly every area of our lives and disrupting our ability to live as we once did. Fortunately, you and your household members have access to LifeMart, an online discount center and mobile app. LifeMart makes everyday life a little more affordable—and a lot more manageable—with both national and local discounts from brands you know and love.

**Why spend more when you don’t have to?**

Discounts* are available on the following goods and services:

- Food and home delivery with brands such as Home Chef, Grubhub, Freshly, Postmates and Instacart
- Pharmacy and prescription savings from CVS, GlassesUSA.com, DiscountContactLenses.com, HAS Store, FSA Store and more
- Home office equipment and accessories offers from Dell, Lenovo, Microsoft, GoToMeeting, and GoToWebinar
- Tutoring, training and educational resources from The Princeton Review, Rosetta Stone and Hooked On Phonics
- Grocery coupons and discounts on Costco, BJ’s and Sam’s Club memberships
- Download and streaming services from Amazon Prime, Roku, Hulu, Vudu, Fubo, Fandango Now, CBS All Access, Sling, Showtime and ESPN+
- Health and wellness products and services such as Fitbit, Beachbody, Men’s Health and Women’s Health
- Pet products and services from Rover, Bark Box, Pet Care Rx, Pretty Litter, Box Dog and Ollie

Make shopping with LifeMart a regular part of your money-saving routine and save on the items you want most!

Visit your member website to access LifeMart today!

*Discounts and brands change regularly, so check back often for the latest resources.
Resources during the COVID-19 pandemic

As COVID-19 continues to spread, many people are anxious about the uncertainty of what is happening. This is a reminder that your program is here to help you and your household members by providing compassionate care and resources any time—day or night. It is completely confidential and free to use.

Review the COVID-19 What's Trending article on your program website for tip sheets on preventing compassion fatigue, managing anxiety, financial best practices and more.

Go online to the Learning Center to find articles, videos and webinars on a variety of emotional and physical health and wellness topics.

Call your program and a licensed clinician will ask questions to understand your unique situation and provide you with the best help possible to meet your needs, and those of you household members.

Access Work-Life Services for information on child and elder care, educational resources for children, tips for working remote, budgeting, health and fitness and more.

Clinicians can help you with, or direct you to resources for, a variety of concerns including:
- Feelings of anxiety, stress, depression, isolation and grief
- Marital, parenting or other relationship issues
- Enhancing resilience and staying mindful
- Alcohol or substance misuse
- Child and elder care
- Housing issues

Engage with Digital Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (DCBT) apps:
- FearFighter® for anxiety, panic and phobia
- RESTORE® for sleep difficulty and insomnia
- MoodCalmer® for depression

Your program is here to help. Give us a call or go online.

Air Force EAP
1-866-580-9078
www.AFPC.AF.MIL/EAP