

Coping with the Holidays

Some tips for reducing stress
and making your own traditions.



Holiday Pressures

For many Veterans and their Families, the holidays are not an easy time of year. In fact, they are often the toughest. The holidays can also bring up unpleasant reminders of previous traumatic experiences. To-do lists, busy gatherings, and crowds can feel overwhelming.

For Veterans

To help Veterans and their Families through this difficult time, here's a list of tips and strategies for coping during the holiday season. Listen to your body, and do what you can to take care of it.



Try to identify your body's signs that you are feeling overwhelmed: for example, you may get sweaty palms, have shallow breathing, or feel nauseated. You may also feel more irritated or impatient than usual. Being aware of these signs can help you cope safely.



In advance of the holidays, try some techniques that will help to reduce the intensity of these physical sensations or negative emotions. For example, take a look at this list of emotional grounding techniques: <https://www.verywellmind.com/grounding-techniques-for-ptsd-2797300>

Move your body. Taking a walk, doing yoga, running, shovelling snow, or doing another form of exercise can help reduce tension and give you a stimulation break.

Maintain a routine. Try to go to bed and get up at regular times. Schedule time to rest or take a nap daily. Avoid skipping meals. Take your regular medications.



Be careful about consuming alcohol or recreational drugs. Too much of any substance can make it harder to manage your feelings, and may intensify mental health conditions. Some alcohol and recreational drugs can even interfere with certain medications used to treat anxiety and depression.

CELEBRATE AND TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF

Plan something to look forward to. It could be a favourite meal, an activity you enjoy, or something extra special to indulge in. Create new rituals that are uniquely suited to you.

Do things that honor your difficult experiences. For example, you can schedule some time to pay respects to friends you have lost, or to mourn for activities you can no longer do. Consider making a donation or an act of kindness in memory of an event or a person who affected you.

CREATE A PLAN FOR SOCIALIZING SAFELY



Work on a plan for social activities during the holidays. If it is possible and safe to do so, work on this plan with your family and friends – this can make it easier for you to take space when you need it. Remember: time spent on recce is seldom wasted!

Here are some ideas for what to include in your plan:

- Before attending an event, decide how long you expect you'll want to stay. What will you do if you want to leave early, or stay later? Will your family or friends stay if you decide to leave, or will they come with you?
- If the event is at your home, identify a quiet, private location to go if you need to decompress and relax. If you'll be hosting an event, it might be helpful to arrange, in advance, with a friend or family member to take over if you need a break, or need to focus on yourself.
- Make room for flexibility. Plans don't always go perfectly. If this is the case, be willing to have a conversation later about what can be modified for future events.

LOOKING TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR COMMUNITY?



Volunteering to help others – at a local organization, or someone in your social circle – can be very effective in combatting feelings of loneliness and sadness.

For Families and Friends

Here are some ideas to help Family members and friends support themselves as well as their Veteran loved ones.

Manage expectations. Ask your Veteran loved one what they need over the holidays, and communicate what you are hoping for. What sort of plan can you come up with that meets both of your needs?

It really is okay to say no. Maybe this is not the best year for you to host the big family dinner, or to bake five different kinds of holiday sweets when two will do.



Don't overschedule. Downtime is vital for most of us, and particularly so for Veterans and their Families living with mental health conditions.

If you or your Veteran loved one has difficulty with crowds, shopping centres can be triggering. It may be better to shop online. This can also free up time for other holiday tasks, such as decorating or baking.

And don't forget, that you need care and rest too.

Resources

Directory of Services

<https://atlasveterans.ca/directory-of-services/>

Families and Friends

<https://atlasveterans.ca/knowledge-hub/families-and-friends/>

PTSD and some treatment options

<https://atlasveterans.ca/knowledge-hub/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/>



The work of the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families is made possible thanks to funding from Veterans Affairs Canada.

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Funded by Veterans Affairs Canada
Financé par Anciens Combattants Canada

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