

WELLNESSMONTHLY

COVID-19 Pandemic-Holiday Mix Calls for Boundary-Setting | **November 2020**



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Pandemic-Holiday Mix Calls for Boundary-Setting

Personal boundaries can be difficult to set and maintain, especially when you're expected to act a certain way.

As the holiday season and COVID-19 pandemic intersect, you may find yourself struggling to feel physically safe, emotionally protected, and aligned with your fundamental beliefs and principles. Even if you are usually adept at upholding reasonable boundaries, you may be more susceptible than usual to attempts to break them down.

Now is a good time to take stock of personal boundaries that help you determine whether behavior directed toward you is acceptable or unacceptable, and what you will tolerate when they are pushed. You may need to embrace new ones, redefine others or eliminate those that are no longer relevant to your life.

When setting boundaries, it's important to focus on what is most important to you. Are any of your boundaries overly rigid? Too loose? Poorly articulated? Or are they just right?

Holiday Planning

You may be looking forward to the holiday season, but also feeling anxious about it. No one is sure exactly how long the pandemic will last and who might get sick next. Mixed emotions, low energy and heightened sensitivity are normal reactions.

You may find it necessary to carefully thread the needle with regard to holiday traditions and social gatherings this year. It helps to anticipate scenarios and be prepared to respond to them. For example:

- The holidays tend to be fraught with unrealistic expectations. It may be necessary to dial yours down. That could mean skipping the annual ski trip, not visiting grandma's house or holding a religious observance with just your immediate household members.
- Job loss, financial woes, childcare needs, illness or a death in the family, and even too much togetherness can strain family dynamics. Such issues make it harder to relax and enjoy the holidays.



Here are some ways to prepare yourself and avoid feeling like you are letting others down:

- 1. Watch emotions.** There is a natural inclination to avoid uncomfortable emotions rather than try to pinpoint their source. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) refers to Hilary Jacobs Hendel's "[Change Triangle](#)" as a useful model. Hendel, a licensed social worker, recommends "identifying the defenses and inhibitory emotions of shame, anxiety and guilt that prevent us from being in touch with core emotions like joy, anger, sadness and fear." This approach can help you respond appropriately to others' needs, including healthy adults who expect you to put their needs above your own.
- 2. Learn to say "no."** This is a lot easier to do if you are comfortable with your boundaries. Holiday periods are associated with added responsibilities and social demands that can cause stress, fatigue, depression, unhealthy eating and drinking, sleep disruption and neglected exercise routines. The pandemic is already impacting these behaviors. Don't overextend or overspend.
- 3. Be empathetic.** Express boundaries using "I statements" while still acknowledging the needs of others with empathy and compassion. Avoid over-explaining your stance. Be kind but direct. The more you practice limits, the less guilty you will feel over time.
- 4. Track decision-making.** NAMI describes patterns of self-neglect, people-pleasing or settling as self-abandonment. Ask yourself: "Why am I making this decision?" If your answer involves feelings of guilt, shame, fear or timidity, you might be operating from abandonment mode.
- 5. Take care of yourself.** Grant yourself permission to feel how you feel. Find activities that help boost your emotional resilience. Get some exercise, spend time in nature, talk with friends, play music, read, cook a healthy meal, sleep in.

COVID Response

Lingering resentments can undermine quality time with friends and family. Unresolved issues are more likely to surface when a host is not clear about COVID-19 preventive measures or visitors are not willing to comply with them. It's important to make people in your social and/or family circle aware of your personal COVID-19 safety precautions. Be willing to assert that your health is a priority. Don't allow yourself to be pressured into doing something you feel uncomfortable about.

Here are some suggestions to reduce exposure risk for everyone involved. When people know what to expect in advance, they can decide for themselves whether your expectations reflect their own boundaries:

- Invite relatives and friends to attend a virtual celebration.
- Ask guests to stay home if they suspect exposure to an infected person, are in a vulnerable population (e.g., elderly, immune-compromised) or have symptoms of illness.
- Plan ahead. Agree on the party location, duration and number of people who will be invited.
- Practice social distancing and, when possible, entertain outdoors.
- Require visitors from outside of your immediate household to wear a mask.
- Prepare food in advance. When eating together, do not share utensils, glasses, plates or food.

In addition, if you anticipate conflict arising over sensitive topics, ask friends and family members to agree in advance on rules of engagement and how to diffuse arguments. Pick a sign or phrase to use when tensions rise to indicate that it's time to move on to a more neutral subject.

Setting healthy boundaries can have many benefits, including helping people make decisions based on what is best for them, not just the people around them. This autonomy is an important part of self-care.