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## **Preparing for the Holidays during a Pandemic: Mental Health Tips**

This holiday season, Oklahomans are facing a dilemma: Enjoy a traditional gathering with family members or risk spreading the coronavirus.

Mentally and emotionally, this can be a difficult choice – especially for those who consider holiday gatherings essential and nonnegotiable.

Yet, even in “normal” years, the holidays can be an emotional period. Grieving over deceased loved ones, arguing over politics, or being laid off from a job are common this time of year.

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is offering some tips to get through this challenging time.

- Whatever your choice, know that not everyone may agree. That’s OK. Make the choices you believe are best, and be comfortable with that decision.
- Try not to focus on you can’t do this holiday season and instead focus on what you can do.
- There are ways to connect with loved ones while staying physically distanced. Many families are using video chat, phone calls, or planning virtual gift exchanges and games online to spend time together.
- Lower your expectations for the holidays this year. Don’t stress if everything isn’t perfect. Remember, you are not alone – people around the world are experiencing the same dilemma.
- Mental Health America notes that people with a mental health condition may have an especially difficult time with the uncertainty and the change of plans this year. Many people with mental health conditions find consistency important in their recovery, especially during times of high stress – like both the pandemic and the holiday season. Feeling a loss of control and disappointment are common.
- Change is difficult for most people, especially when you didn’t ask for or even expect these changes.
- Identify your feelings. Most people are feeling a lot of different ways at once right now, which is hard for our brains to process. This year has been a difficult year for many reasons, which means some distress is likely related to things other than the holidays. If nothing else, we’ve all lost our sense of normalcy this year – it’s OK to grieve this.

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- It is completely normal to be feeling a bit more emotional than usual right now. Take some time to sort through your emotions by journaling, talking to a friend, or just spending some quiet time alone thinking. Once you have a better idea of the specific feelings you're experiencing, you can start making plans to cope with them.
- Practice gratitude. Being thankful is a major focus this time of year, and while it may seem harder to find things to appreciate, there is still plenty to be thankful for. Make a conscious effort to regularly identify some things you're grateful for. It can be something as broad as your health, or something as specific as your favorite song playing on the radio the last time you got in the car.
- Remember the basics like sleeping enough, eating well, and getting exercise to help reduce stress levels.
- Change is hard, but it isn't always bad. There are still ways to celebrate the season with your loved ones, even if you must give up some of your favorite traditions. Find creative ways to adapt. Or start new traditions – they may even add more meaning to your holiday season.
- This holiday season will be difficult for everyone. The sacrifices we make now, though, are based on the hope for all of us to be together soon.

ODMHSAS has numerous resources available to help Oklahomans in need find services that work. Free, confidential assistance is available 24 hours a day for people in distress or their loved ones by calling 1-800-273-8255. Links to services related to COVID or everyday struggles can be found by calling the Reachout Hotline at 800-522-9054, or simply by dialing 211. You also can call any of the statewide network of community mental health centers, visit with your primary care physician or talk to local faith leaders. All are ways to start the process of seeking wellness.

To access resources and programs near you, visit the department's website at [www.odmhsas.org](http://www.odmhsas.org).

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