

# Seasons Greetings

## Coping with Cancer at the Holidays: Tips for Managing Holiday Stress

Holidays can be stressful under the best circumstances. With all the visiting, shopping, planning, cleaning, decorating and cooking, it's easy to become tired and overwhelmed. When cancer treatment – or the lasting effects of past cancer treatment – are added to the mix, normal holiday stress can become unbearable. Here are some tips for making your merriment more manageable.

**Acknowledge where you are** - During the holidays, it's hard to break out of traditional roles. If you've always made an elaborate dinner, or spent days decorating your house, you might be unwilling to admit that things are different this year. Your loved ones might also expect you to be up to fulfilling your typical seasonal role, particularly if you have finished treatment. It's important to recognize:

- **The physical limitations brought on by current or past treatment:** Fatigue, discomfort and changes in mobility can make performing your traditional tasks much more difficult. Nausea and changes in taste may limit enjoyment of food and prohibit meal preparation. Some side effects of cancer or treatment can linger long after treatment ends.
- **The financial burden of cancer:** Time away from work, prescription costs and other lifestyle changes during treatment may make this a more difficult year financially.
- **Family dynamics may have changed:** Cancer treatment can put an enormous strain on personal relationships, which can be emphasized at the holidays.
- **Fear of recurrence or worsening condition:** Many patients put incredible pressure on themselves to make the holidays perfect because the future is uncertain.
- **The importance of setting reasonable expectations:** Often, patients push themselves too hard to operate at full capacity. This can be unhealthy, causing side effects such as fatigue to worsen.

**Reframe expectations and reshape traditions** - To get the most enjoyment out of this holiday season, try to:

- **Reframe your expectations:** Think about your typical holiday activities; determine which are most important and then modify them to meet your needs. For example, if you don't want to give up hosting a party, enlist help with cleaning, decorating and cooking well ahead of time so you don't become overwhelmed.

- **Put yourself first:** It's so easy to feel obligated to accept every invitation, or fulfill every expectation: DON'T! Limit your involvement to what you truly can handle and will enjoy.
- **Rethink traditions:** There is no "right way" to celebrate. Perhaps outdoor activities, such as caroling or ice-skating, have always been part of your family tradition. It's hard to imagine the holidays without these elements. Think of ways to modify your traditions, or start some new ones this year. Indoor activities like decorating gingerbread houses together or competing at board games might become activities your family looks forward to for years to come.
- **Reassess gift-giving:** Make things easier this year by relying on the internet for shopping when possible. Better yet, consider scaling back the gift-giving by instituting a Yankee Swap (also called White Elephant Swap) or Secret Santa with your relatives and friends – this will reduce your gift list and add some fun and mystery to the process.
- **Use healthy living to manage stress:** Getting regular exercise and sleep, eating sensibly and sticking to a routine will all help reduce stress. Avoid overindulging on seasonal food and beverages, and keep late nights and long days to a minimum if you're feeling fatigued.
- **Seek support:** It is extremely common to feel overwhelmed and/or depressed at the holidays without the added burden of cancer. There are many resources available to help you cope.

**Tips for loved ones of those with cancer** - It can be hard to adjust when your loved one has cancer, and it's especially difficult during the holidays. Here are some tips:

- **Listen, and acknowledge that this year is different:** Even if treatment has ended, your loved one may not be able to function at full capacity this year and take on all their traditional holiday responsibilities. Don't assume everything is "back to normal."
- **Discuss expectations of the holiday season:** See where you can help them manage expectations, modify activities and help when needed.
- **Extend invitations, but make sure not to pressure:** Help your loved one find the balance between isolation and obligation by discussing the holiday schedule.
- **Allow your loved one to contribute:** Continuing to participate in holiday activities can be an important way for a patient with cancer to cope during the holidays. Gauge their expectations and find ways to help facilitate their contributions.
- **Recognize when you or your loved one needs support:** There are many resources that can help.

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