

Alone for the holidays? Here's how to find joy in the solitude

Source: [CNN](#)

'Tis the season to [stay home and stay safe](#). That means no more raucous get-togethers with extended family, being relegated to the kids' table or figuring out how to politely decline Grandma's fruitcake.

We know spending the holidays on our own will [keep our loved ones healthy](#). That doesn't make it any easier.

But there's joy to be found in solitude. We spoke to experts in stress and connection who told us how to navigate the complicated emotions around spending the holidays alone. It may not be easy or ideal, but we humans are capable of withstanding more than we know, including lonely holidays.

Embrace your feelings

First -- the holidays will feel different this year. And whether spending them on your own brings up grief, relief or something you didn't expect, you should lean into those emotions. It's healthy to feel them rather than shove them back down.

But leaning *too* deeply into the negativity can ground you in it for longer than you'd like.

"We should recognize what our feelings are and what they're telling us," says Lynn Bufka, the American Psychological Association's associate executive director for practice research and policy. "But sitting in that doesn't help."

So try out some positive distractions -- reading a good book, going for a walk or taking on a cooking project all put your mind and body to work.

If you still find yourself in a funk, that's OK, too, says Jonathan Kanter, a psychologist who heads the University of Washington's Center for the Science of Social Connection. There's no right or wrong way to feel right now. Self-compassion is key.

And if all else fails, he says, you can wake up the next morning and try all over again.

Make the day your own

You're on your own this year -- time to play by your own rules. Bufka says doing whatever *you* want this holiday will make it a bit more fun.

"Think of it as an opportunity to slow down and do the things that you want to do," she says.

Maybe you [can't stomach turkey](#) -- so eat pizza instead. You won't need to brave the sleet and snow on the drive to your parents' house this year, so move your typical winter celebration to July instead. And rather than watch your family members open gifts for hours, you can watch hours upon hours of low-brow reality TV.

Judith Moskowitz, a social psychologist and professor at Northwestern University, says her extended family is going to try out a Zoom escape room this year. How it'll work is anyone's guess. But to cope with the distance, she's continuing her "normal holiday traditions -- on steroids."

"It's not necessarily going to be awful," she says of this year's holiday. "There are possibilities for some good. It could even be better!"

Spread the love

There's no reason for superficial small talk this year. Instead, use this time apart to "get back to the basic dance steps of relationships," Kanter recommends. That means expressing our love for the people we're closest to in new, slightly uncomfortable ways.

Be more vulnerable than you typically would this holiday, he says. Have meaningful conversations, and tell the people you love why you love them. Physical contact is off-limits for now, so wrap somebody in a warm hug of emotion -- Kanter says you'll emerge from the pandemic with stronger relationships.

If you're sick of Zoom calls, consider [writing letters to loved ones](#), Bufka recommends. Let your pen wander -- remember, we're expressing our love in big ways now -- and surprise someone with a handwritten note of appreciation.

Focus on the good

If you find yourself slipping into an unpleasant mood, train your mind to focus on some of the good things on the way, Moskowitz recommends.

Here's a sample of some good things: [Promising Covid-19 vaccines](#) will soon be available, and [Dolly Parton helped fund](#) one of them. A [tiny owl was found in the Rockefeller Christmas tree](#) and will soon be re-released into the wild. Cookies exist, and [you can bake some at home](#).

Tiny, tangible moments of joy or reminders of good things to come can power you through an otherwise difficult day, she says.

Find the holiday spirit

A lot's changed this year, but it's still the season to give. So give, Kanter says -- it'll almost certainly make you feel better.

"When we engage in acts of altruism, it helps the person we're helping, but research shows that it has mental benefits for the giver, too," he says.

[Happiness researchers](#) have found that people who volunteer often walk away with better mental well-being -- having done some good for others in the process.

"It's the cliché of the holiday season -- take care of and be inclusive of others," Kanter says. "But I think what the pandemic has taught us, more than anything, is that it's important to go back to basics, to what really matters."

Caring for people and causes close to you -- in a safe, coronavirus-conscious way -- will melt away some of the negativity you feel. And if you want to help but don't know where to start, [CNN's Impact Your World compiled a comprehensive list](#) of causes and organizations assisting people during the pandemic.

Remember the 'why'

It's not going to be easy to turn down an invitation from the people you love this holiday season. It'll probably be just plain sad. But when you're feeling low, Bufka advises, remember why you made that difficult choice in the first place -- to keep those people safe.

And while it may not feel like it, stressful situations like this holiday season (and really, 2020 as a whole) is what humans are built for. We're more resilient than we know, says Moskowitz, who studies how people find positivity during periods of extreme stress.

There's still light to be found even if our holiday is a bit more muted than we're used to. You might find that light in volunteering, in a heartfelt phone call or a plateful of cookies.