



Coping with the Holidays

Compiled by: Sheena's Place Program Team

The holiday season can be a time filled with joy and excitement, with new activities and events to look forward to. However, for people living with disordered eating and body image concerns, the holiday season is one that can also be quite distressing. The following summary sheet consists of strategies and techniques that may help to alleviate some of the distress that can accompany the holiday season to make room for more enjoyment. Each strategy has a corresponding worksheet that can be found at the back of this package.

1. Plan a Support System

Who are the people that you can turn to when you need support? In some cases, it may be someone who will be with you at an event, be it a family member or friend. It might also be someone who will not be present at events with you. Either way, let your support know ahead of time that you may be contacting them periodically. *See the Worksheet entitled 'Plan a Support System Part 1'.*

If your support system isn't available and you require immediate or emergency services, do not hesitate to call the distress centres in your area. If you live in the Toronto area, below are two resources you can use when distressed:

Toronto Distress Line (24 hours) - (416) 408-4357
Gerstein Crisis Centre (24 hours) - (416) 929-5200

2. I've Determined Who is in my Support System... Now What?

You are always the judge of what is helpful for you. Make an appointment to talk with your supportive others before the holiday to help you decide what they can do that is helpful for you. *See the Worksheet entitled 'Plan a Support System Part 2' for a list of examples of how supportive others might help.*

3. Predict Moments of High Stress

For some, seeing both family and friends and attending multiple holiday commitments can be distressing. It is important to plan the activities you will attend and which you will not. The holidays can often be filled with many commitments; **do not feel obligated** to attend each. For the commitments you choose to attend, try to anticipate scenarios that might cause stress and plan ideas in advance around how you can get through the stressful situations. *See the Worksheet entitled 'Predict and Plan for High-Stress Moments' for a list of common scenarios that may come up during the holidays and how you can better prepare yourself to face them.*

4. Family Relationship Issues are NOT Uncommon

For some, the holiday season can also be a time of loneliness. Be aware that the media often portrays an idealized version of the holiday season; one that is filled with continuous joyful moments spent with friends and family. If you are a person who does not have family or friends to spend time with, or who has a rocky relationship with family and friends, know that you are NOT ALONE.

Unfortunately, it can be tempting to engage in symptoms in an effort to feel better temporarily. By anticipating some of the possible emotional traps in advance, you will likely be better able to cope, when you encounter them. Consider seeking out alternative ways of finding personal connection this holiday season, be it through volunteer opportunities, group activities, or support groups. *See the Worksheet entitled 'Plan Alternative Activities' to help brainstorm activities that can keep you busy throughout the holidays.*

5. Predict Negative Thoughts You Might Have

We tend to be our own worst critics. It is important to challenge negative, unhelpful thoughts. One way to do this is through coping statements or affirmations. Complimenting yourself may be difficult, so it may help to focus on individual steps you have made. It can also be helpful to come up with coping statements that work for you. *See the Worksheet entitled 'Predict and Plan to Challenge Unhelpful Thoughts' for examples techniques that may work to challenge negative thinking.*

6. Try Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness can help with eating disorders because it helps to cultivate non-judgmental awareness of thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness teaches us that thoughts ebb and flow and encourages us to become an observer of our thoughts as opposed to being directed into action by them. *See the Worksheet entitled 'Practicing Mindfulness' for information on simple mindfulness practices that can help you through the holiday.*

7. Predict How You Might Respond to Food and Plan Meals

The holidays' emphasis on food is one that can be very challenging for many. If you are unsure if a food will trigger you, offer to bring a dish that you feel comfortable eating. Plan to choose what you will eat. It is important to try and stick to your meal plan, if you have one, and be mindful of the foods offered. Select the foods that you feel safe eating and are the least anxiety provoking. Plan the skills and techniques you will use should strong negative emotions or anxiety arise. These techniques may consist of: repeating affirmations, deep breathing, going for a walk in nature, or journaling, among other things. *See the worksheet entitled 'Create Time for Self-Care' for a list of examples of relaxing things you can do to get through the holidays.*



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Plan a Support System Part 1

Worksheet

The purpose of this worksheet is to start to identify people in your life who may be able to support you through a difficult time. This sheet is **not** meant to highlight the **number** of personal supports you have in your life, but rather, to initiate brainstorming around whom you could potentially reach out to. Additionally, this worksheet will help you to identify what type of support each friend/family member listed is best suited to help with. For example, one friend might be better to call when you just need to get out of the house, while another friend might be someone you can talk to about specific triggers you are going through.

Look at the chart below and fill out the name of a person you can contact, their contact information, and what type of support this person might be helpful with. This list can also include pets, or organizations that provide support services that you may find helpful.

Name	Contact Information	Type of Support



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Plan a Support System Part 2

Worksheet

Once you have identified a person who might act as a supportive other to you, the next step is to brainstorm ways they can support you. Remember, you are the expert of your own experiences and only you can identify what is or is not supportive. Please use the following examples only as guidelines to promote your own techniques of support.

- Set up a plan with your supportive other prior to an event to let them know how they can support you.
- Where possible, plan to have a designated "support person" at events that can help you when you are feeling triggered. This should be someone who knows your triggers and can help you to cope without engaging in symptomatic behaviour.
- Make up a code signal or sentence with your support person before a holiday event. If you are starting to feel overwhelmed, you can give your support person the signal to step out of the situation for support.
- For those who do not have a supportive other they can bring to an event, plan ahead to find a friend you can call throughout the night for support.
- Feelings of being overwhelmed can often continue into the night after you leave an event. Keep your support persons on speed dial so you can receive support even after you have left an event.
- If it would be a support to you, consider using your support person as a 'reality check' with food, to either help you navigate food choices or to give you support throughout the meal.
- If possible, discuss with your family members and friends the types of conversations that are unhelpful and triggering. For example, consider the possibility of encouraging your family to engage in a "No Diet Talk" zone over the holidays. Use your support person to help if challenging diet talk and unhealthy conversations occur.
- Try your best not to skip appointments with your treatment team, if you have one. Keeping in touch with your treatment team over the holidays is an important way to receive extra support.

What other ways can your friends or family members support you?

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Predict and Plan for High-Stress Moments

Worksheet

Use this worksheet to help anticipate scenarios you might encounter over the holidays that may be stress-provoking so that you can better prepare yourself to face these scenarios as they arise. Examine the examples listed below to see which might be applicable for you. Remember, these examples are only intended as guidelines and will not work for everyone. You can use the space provided in this worksheet to brainstorm your own examples and techniques of getting through difficult moments.

Predict Which People Will Make You Uncomfortable

There are certain people who we may find more distressing than others. Though we may try to avoid engaging in conversations with these people, sometimes distressing moments and comments are inevitable. Where possible, plan to set boundaries ahead of time: ask that people not comment on your body, appearance or eating habits. Sometimes setting these boundaries with family members can be difficult. Below is a list of common comments and examples of how you can respond. Remember, if you find it difficult to respond, you can always excuse yourself.

Example 1: Comments about Your Appearance

Comment: "You look so much better."

Response: "Thank you... So tell me more about how you've been."

- Hearing feedback about how you look can be very distressing and is often unavoidable when you are seeing family members or friends you have not seen in a while. Focus on the happiness and caring in a person's tone when they say "you look better". Do not let the eating disorder lead you to misinterpret these words in a way that deprives you of hearing that people really care about you.
- Changing the topic quickly in your response is a great way to shift the focus off of your appearance and to avoid further questioning that may cause stress.
- Remember, you DO NOT have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. There are polite ways of excusing yourself from answering invasive questions, such as, "I do not feel comfortable talking about this", "I do not feel comfortable answering your questions right now", "I would prefer not to discuss this", or "I do not think this is an appropriate place to discuss this".

Comment: "You've lost/gained a lot of weight, is everything okay?"

Response: "Yes, everything is okay, thank you... tell me more about how you've been."

- Again, changing the topic quickly in your response is a great way to shift the focus off of your appearance and on to other people.
- Remember, similar to not having to answer any uncomfortable questions, you also DO NOT have to explain what has been going on with you. Family members might be curious about why your appearance has changed, but you are never obligated to give explanations. Though sometimes family members can come across as being very insensitive, it may be helpful to focus on the fact that they're asking because they care about you.

Example 2: Comments about Your Eating Patterns

Comment: "You eat like a bird. Come on, have another helping... You need to gain weight."

Response: "Thanks for your concern, but I won't get into a debate about my weight. Please leave it up to me to decide how many helpings I eat."

Example 3: Unhealthy Discussions around Dieting

The holidays often yield discussions around "indulging", the categorization of "bad" and "good" foods, and even New Year's resolutions that often revolve around weight loss. Predicting these types of conversations before they happen can be a good way to alleviate stress. Where possible, plan to set boundaries ahead of time around "Diet Talk" and other conversations that make you uncomfortable.

Comment: "I am going to be 'bad' and have a second helping", "I am starting my diet tomorrow to counteract everything I've eating today", or "My New Year's resolution is to lose weight!"

Response: Depending on how well you know the other person, and whether or not you have set boundaries ahead of time around "Diet Talk", your response will vary. Below are responses that may be helpful for a variety of situations.

- "I would prefer if we do not talk about dieting. Let's focus on catching up with one another."
- "I am not comfortable being part of this discussion and I would prefer if you did not talk about dieting and weight loss around me"
- "Remember our discussion about keeping this holiday a 'No Diet Talk' zone? Let's change the subject and talk about something else like..."
- If you are not comfortable with challenging Diet Talk, find ways to change the topic to steer the conversation in a different direction.

What other stressful scenarios or comments can you anticipate this Holiday season? Use the space below to plan for other scenarios we haven't listed. Also, practicing your responses to these scenarios and comments is imperative! Use a friend or role play on your own to practice your response so it feels more natural and comfortable to say to another person.

Comment or Scenario: _____

Response/Plan: _____

Comment or Scenario: _____

Response/Plan: _____

Comment or Scenario: _____

Response/Plan: _____

Comment or Scenario: _____

Response/Plan: _____

Comment or Scenario: _____

Response/Plan: _____



Plan Alternative Activities

Worksheet

For many people the holiday season can be a time of loneliness. The media often portrays an idealized image of what the holiday season should be like, which is often a stark contrast to the reality of family gatherings and relationships. Don't blame yourself for family or friendship conflicts. People are no different during the holidays than any other time of the year. Remember that you are responsible only for your own actions and for taking care of yourself.

The purpose of this worksheet is to help you brainstorm various activities that can keep you busy throughout the holidays and to help you find other ways to experience connection with others. See the examples below and add in your own ideas in the spaces provided.

- Plan to volunteer this holiday season. There are many extra toy drives, food banks or soup kitchens that open up to help give others extra support throughout the holiday season. Call around to your local community centres to see how you can get involved!
- Check out where the best holiday lights or displays are within your community. If you're centred near Toronto, there are many places you can visit to view the lights such as The Distillery District, University Avenue, Young and Dundas Square, Nathan Phillips Square, the Harbourfront Centre and more!
- Check out the listings for concerts and band gigs at local venues.
- Visit the local ice skating rinks or go see a movie with a friend.
- Use the extra time off work or school to read a book you have been waiting to have time to read.

What other activities can you think of to keep busy this holiday season?

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Predict and Plan for Unhelpful Thoughts

Worksheet

The Holiday season can create a lot of added stress for many people. Where there is added stress, there can also be an increase in self-criticism and negative thoughts. The purpose of this worksheet is to help brainstorm ideas and techniques to plan for and challenge negative thoughts. See the examples of techniques below to use as guidelines, and use the space provided below to add in your own examples that work for you. Since it is often difficult to think of calming techniques while feeling overwhelmed, it might also be helpful to make a copy of the techniques that work for you and bring the list to an event you're attending for quick and easy access to support.

Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

Think about common negative thoughts that come up for you and write down positive thoughts that challenge these negative thoughts. This is not usually an easy task, so if it helps, think about what you might say to someone you love if they had the same negative thoughts you were having. How would you respond to each negative thought in a kind, non-judgmental way? This may feel very unnatural at first and you may not even believe what you're writing, but that is okay! Use the space below to develop examples.

- Negative thought: _____
Positive response: _____

- Negative thought: _____
Positive response: _____

- Negative thought: _____
Positive response: _____

- Negative thought: _____
Positive response: _____

- Negative thought: _____
Positive response: _____
- Negative thought: _____
Positive response: _____

Coping Statements and Affirmations

Another way to challenge negative thoughts is through coping statements or affirmations. Coping statements and affirmations can be very personal and what may work for one person may not work for another. Take a look at the examples below and try out the ones that you think might work for you. Use the space below to add in your own coping statements or affirmations that you find might work or that already work for you.

- "I am going to be okay"
- "I can handle this"
- "I am entitled to..."
- "I am doing very well"
- "I love and approve of myself"
- "I am good enough"
- "Walking away from something that is bad for me is not quitting"
- "I will not feel guilty for taking care of myself"
- "I am worthy of love and respect"
- "I have faith in my process of recovery"
- "This is a new and wonderful day; there will never be another day like this one"
- "I will do the very best I know how, the very best I can"
- "I am doing better than I think"
- "Today, I will concentrate on taking one step forward, no matter how small"
- "If I let myself down by slipping back into old habits, I can gently correct my course without feeling that I have failed"
- "I AM beautiful"
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Negative Self-Talk Free Zone

This holiday, attempt to cut out as much negative self-talk as possible. This can be a difficult challenge to tackle, but once you begin to look and watch for negative self-talk, you'll likely notice that you can begin to catch yourself as you're thinking unhelpful thoughts. If you begin to notice negative thinking, don't beat yourself up about it! Simply notice the negative self-talk and let it go. Use some of the previous strategies in this worksheet to replace the negative thought with a more positive one. *Also, see our next worksheet in this package to see mindfulness techniques you can use to help you get through the holidays.*

If possible, attempt to make the holiday time a negative self-talk free zone. The relationship you have with other family members and friends will determine the degree to which you can enforce a negative self-talk free zone. For example, if many of your family members do not know about your eating disorder yet, you might have to start with yourself. If you think your family members and friends might be receptive to devoting the holidays, or even one day out of the holidays, to ban engaging in negative self-talk, bring the idea up. Let your family members know that you will not put up with negative self-talk from yourself or from them!



Practicing Mindfulness

Worksheet

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness refers to the practice of purposefully paying attention to the present moment and listening to whatever thoughts that arise in a non-judgmental way. This means that the thoughts we experience are not to be judged as good, bad, ugly or otherwise. A main component of mindfulness is the idea of acceptance, whereby we acknowledge that we all experience ups and downs and that we all have strengths and weaknesses.

How Mindfulness Can Help with Eating Disorders

Mindfulness can help with eating disorders because it encourages a way of thinking that does not judge any thoughts that come into mind. Mindfulness encourages an acceptance of the obsession, shame and worry thoughts that pass through the mind by encouraging us to become an observer of our thought experience rather than becoming totally immersed in it.

Many people with eating disorders avoid things that cause them to feel uncomfortable, especially when it comes to emotions. Mindfulness can help to create a tolerance and comfort for those feelings by sitting through them instead of distracting away from them. By learning the true nature of emotions, we begin to have a deeper awareness of our needs and soon feel deserving of asserting ourselves to others. Mindfulness can often be the catalyst for bringing about these significant changes.

Ways to Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness is not as difficult to practice as you might assume. The process of this practice looks different for everyone and there is **no right or wrong** way to practice mindfulness.

Start off by finding a quiet spot where you likely won't be interrupted. Make sure your body is comfortable, yet aware. Start by thinking about what you hope to achieve from the practice, such as non-judgment, patience, new beginnings, non-striving, acceptance, or letting go.

Next, take a couple of deep breaths and then settle into slowly breathing in and out. The breath acts as an anchor or point of awareness. Use the focusing of your breath as a way to regain feelings of calmness. Focus on the physical experience of your breath. Is your chest falling and rising? Are you feeling the air tickle your nose? Try having an awareness of just your breath for the first five minutes. For some people, using the breath as an anchor can increase feelings of anxiety. If this is the case, choose something else to focus attention on (for example, the soles of the feet on the floor or a sound). Then, for the rest of your practice, take an observer's stance. Watch your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations float by without categorizing, reacting to, or judging them. If you find your mind wandering, just note its occurrence, and go back to your observations and your breath or

alternative anchor. Do not judge yourself if your mind wanders. It will wander. This is completely natural and part of the process. In fact, letting go of expectations is part of the practice!

Examples of Types of Practices

Take a look at the list below to see which type of mindfulness practice will work well for you. Try some, try all, or make your own amendments to these examples to find something that works!

Meditating on the Breath

Take a few minutes to sit and focus on your breath. As thoughts surface, bring your attention back to feeling yourself breathing in and out, in and out.

Walking Meditation

Concentrate on your steps, the surroundings, a mantra, or the ground. Walk slowly and without purpose. There is no need to set a destination.

Music Meditation

Focus on different intervals in the music; feel the rhythms; connect your breath to the rise and fall of the notes.

Yoga

Use various poses to create an awareness of the body as well as its need for and connection to the breath. Align each movement to an inhalation or exhalation.

Mantra Meditation

Mantras are syllables, short poems, or phrases often connected to the breath. Repeat a mantra quietly and slowly to yourself while seated in meditation. Examples would be the sacred "Om," or a something like, "love."

Awareness of the Present

Mindfulness during our daily routines involves being aware of what is going on in the present moment. Our minds easily wander to the past or the future while we perform tasks. Attempt to focus in on the present task at hand: I am washing dishes; I am upset; I am hungry.

How to Start

Beginning to integrate these types of practices into our daily schedules can be a difficult task in and of itself. If you are finding it hard to remember to try these practices daily, try creating scheduled time to meditate on your own, download a meditation app that works for you, or look for groups that regularly meet to mediate. Even simple solutions such as posting reminders around the house or workspace for yourself to remember to relax and be present might help. Similarly, designating a physical space for mindfulness meditation might help, though you can do these practices anywhere.

Adapted from Danielle Beck-Ellsworth's *Mindfulness Tips for Eating Disorders*, *Eating Disorders Recovery Today*, 7(2), Spring 2009.



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Create Time for Self-Care

Worksheet

The holidays can create a lot of extra stress and can be filled with the pressure to be in constant interaction with others. Finding time for yourself before, during, and after commitments is important in maintaining a healthy balance throughout the holidays. Preparing a list ahead of time of various activities you enjoy doing might help you follow through with engaging in these activities. Create a list of activities that only take a few minutes, and some that take more time. Take a look at the list below for some ideas that might work for you and use the space provided below to add in your own examples. When you're feeling overwhelmed, try sliding your finger down the page and see which activity your finger lands on.

- Take a few minutes to sit down and practice deep breathing
- Go for a walk
- Take time to write in your journal about how you're feeling, three things you're thankful for, or three things you are proud of about yourself
- Read a chapter or two of one of the books you're reading
- Light some candles and take a bubble bath
- Listen to some upbeat music
- Create something! Write, draw, paint, or even sing

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Thank you and Happy Holidays!

Resource List

Danielle Beck-Ellsworth's '*Mindfulness Tips for Eating Disorders*'

www.eatingdisorders.review.com

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

National Eating Disorders Information Centre (NEDIC)

www.nedic.ca

UNC Health Care

<http://www.med.unc.edu/www/newsarchive/2009/december/navigating-holiday-food-issues-for-people-with-an-eating-disorder>