



Holiday season survival guide

A detailed guide using CBT-based tools to
help you navigate this holiday season.

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1. Managing holiday stress

Pace of life naturally changes around the holiday season, bringing full schedules and a lot of expectations gradually building into overwhelm.

Noticing your early signs of overload is key; perhaps you spend more time in your head planning and overthinking of events ahead, you find hard to switch off at night, you neglect your self-care, and you're becoming snappier with others.

- Practice grounding techniques like the 5-4-3-2-1 to bring yourself back to the present moment and use slow, paced breathing to reset your body.
- Notice the thoughts and worries that pull you away and take a minute to write down your action plan consisted of small actionable steps that you can take each day.

This whole process takes under 5 minutes and it can give you just enough mental space to shift from your overdrive fight or flight state into clarity and control.



2. Navigating family dynamics

Family gatherings during this time can be joy and connection, but they can also stir up a load of unwanted emotions and old patterns, expectations and triggers.

It is really important that you notice your internal cues before tension builds. Maybe certain comments don't sit right, or specific dynamics make you feel small, responsible, or overwhelmed.

When this happens, pause and check in
with your thoughts;

Are you assuming responsibility for
everyone else's feelings? Are you
predicting negative outcomes and
conflict before it happens?

Although, you cannot control other
people, challenge these thoughts and
remind yourself of the things that you can
control; your boundaries, your responses
and your energy.

Using assertive communication in a
simple and respectful manner, with
phrases like “I do not wish to discuss that”
or “I am going to take a few minutes” you
can protect yourself when feeling getting
pulled into old roles.

Being mindful of your needs during family interactions can make this holiday season feel more manageable and grounded.



3. Coping with loneliness

Inevitably, there is a lot of messaging about togetherness, celebration and connection during this time of year. Loneliness can feel particularly heavy, and it is easy to fall into comparisons that leave you feeling not enough. Be aware of when your mind slips into distorted thoughts like “everyone else’s life is filled with joy, and I am the only one feeling like this”, as these are not true and are merely assumptions that you make based on how you feel.

When loneliness shows up, try to approach it with compassion and not judgment. Telling yourself that it is ok to feel this way, there is nothing wrong with you, and you can still do things to brighten up your day.

Loneliness is a human experience and not a failing.

Choose small intentional actions that can make a meaningful difference, like: sending a message to someone you trust, planning an activity that you know you will enjoy, or creating your own holiday rituals that feel nourishing. The goal is not to eliminate loneliness but to support yourself through it.



4. Financial pressure

Financial pressure this time of year is real, when social expectations, events and gift-giving is adding up quickly. Certain unhelpful thoughts like “I am letting people down” or “I should be able to afford more” are likely to surface.

Take a second to evaluate;
Are these genuine values you hold or expectations shaped by comparison, guilt and social pressure?

This can be particularly tricky for single parents, who feel the financial pressure even more. Trying to manage a budget alone and also wanting to create meaningful moments for their children.

If you find yourself thinking, “I am failing because I cannot offer my kids everything,” remind yourself that you are offering your presence, stability, and love, which matter far more than the price of a gift.

Focus on values-based choices; creating more memories, sharing experiences and being present during this time.

Remember other see and appreciate your care, intention and love you show.



5. Grief

Grief can feel sharper and more present during these days, even if the loss isn't new. This time of year tends to highlight traditions, memories and absences, which can stir up sadness, longing, anger and even guilt for experiencing moments of joy.

Notice the thoughts that tend to accompany your grief, like "I should be over by this now" or "I am bringing the mood down". These thoughts are only adding pressure when what you need is understanding and compassion.

Try reframing them to something more realistic, like “It makes sense that this time of year brings up a lot of emotion for me. That is not necessarily bad, and it shall pass.”

Create rituals with intention, like lighting a candle, displaying a photo, sharing a favourite story or setting aside a quiet moment for remembrance. These can help you honour your person without being consumed by pain.



6. End of Year reflection without judgement

As another year comes to an end, it is natural to reflect on accomplishments, challenges and growth.

However, it is important during this process to steer away from all-or-nothing thinking, like “I didn’t achieve x and therefore my year was a failure”. Instead of focusing on what you didn’t do perfectly, consider what did you learn.

Ask questions like:

- What progress did I make, even if it was small?
- What obstacles did I navigate?
- What did I learn about myself?

Approach setting goals for the next year also with kindness, rather than pressure.

Set goals that feel realistic and achievable, value-based and flexible.

Reflection without judgement allows you to honour your efforts, recognise your growth and enter the new year with curiosity and self-compassion, rather than guilt and shame.

The holiday season can bring both joy and difficulty, and whatever you're feeling is valid. Compassion toward yourself is essential.

Use the tools in this guide to pause, set boundaries, honour your grief, and take intentional steps that help you navigate the season with presence, resilience, and hope for the year ahead.

With love,
Alex ✨