

Not-so-happy holidays? Manage your expectations



The holiday season – whatever you celebrate, if you celebrate – can be merry and bright, but for many of us, it's *not* the most wonderful time of the year.

This is true for virtually all holidays and big occasions: they can be relaxing, social, fun...and also stressful, profoundly lonely, and disappointing. Much of how we experience holidays – the highs and lows – is tied up in expectations, both ours and other people's.

We can feel the pressure to meet expectations from a million different places. Maybe it's pressure to meet social expectations of being happy during a holiday, or of celebrating a certain way. Maybe it's pressure to meet family expectations of following traditions or of splitting

our time fairly. Or maybe it's the pressure of our own expectations for making a holiday special or for how we should feel and what we should do. All these expectations can pull us in opposing directions and create stress and conflict.

The key, then, is learning how to *manage expectations*.

What does it mean to manage expectations?

Managing expectations means figuring out what is sensible to expect and to have expected of you over a holiday. This doesn't necessarily mean figuring out what is *possible*. Rather, it means figuring out what is *realistic* and *reasonable* – what can be done without compromising your physical and mental well-being, all while taking your own needs and wants into account.

Identify and prioritize

Start by thinking about all of the expectations you experience around a holiday. These can include expectations you have for yourself, expectations that you receive from loved ones, and social or cultural ideas about how a holiday should be. Ask yourself: Is this realistic and reasonable? Do I have the time and the financial, physical, mental, and emotional resources for this? What would be the cost of trying to meet all these expectations, in terms of my own well-being, needs, and wants?

If you don't have the resources or if the cost would be too steep, prioritize the expectations according to feasibility (can be done without a steep cost), your own values (what's most important to you?), and what you would genuinely like to do.

Set boundaries

Prioritizing what you will do over a holiday almost certainly means there will be things you will have to say no to. If those things involve other people, communicate your boundaries and limits early, clearly, and respectfully.

Some examples:

- *“We’re preserving downtime for our family, so we’ll be able to stay for the morning and will leave in the early afternoon around 2pm.”*
- *“I won’t be able to make it this year; I’m spending some time with Dad’s side of the family.”*

Make compromises

Especially when negotiating plans with family and loved ones, remember that it’s a two-way street: their needs are important and valid, and so are yours. There will very likely need to be some compromise on both sides. The important thing is to make compromises you can live with – not compromises that will lead to you feeling stressed or resentful.

Some examples:

- *“Since we can’t stay for the whole day, let’s plan a day after the holidays to spend time together.”*

- *“Let’s alternate to make it fair. Would you like to alternate years or holidays (one with Dad’s side, one with you)? I’m open to either.”*

Take the pressure off

Try to take pressure off of yourself and off of the holiday. Let good enough be good enough – you don’t have to do the holiday perfectly. You may prioritize well, communicate clearly, and plan everything carefully – and there may still be some stress and conflict. You can’t control every aspect of how things turn out.

Remember that other people’s plans and expectations are not obligations, they are requests (the same way that yours are!). And you’re allowed to agree to some requests and say no to others.

And finally, remember that ultimately, there is no way that a holiday *has* to be. You don’t have to be cheery, you don’t have to see everyone who wants to see you, you don’t have to bite your tongue and keep the peace if something bothers you, you don’t *have* to do anything: you can choose based on what’s important to you.

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