

# WINTER AND HOLIDAY NEWSLETTER 2020-2021

## NATIONAL WILDFIRE COORDINATING GROUP (NWCG)

Risk Management Committee - Mental Health Subcommittee



## Healthy Holiday Lifestyle

Stress and anxiety from the transition of the seasonal operational tempo combined with the arrival of the holiday season can be challenging. It may be an excellent time to try to reframe your thinking about the holidays, especially this year after a long fire season combined with the impacts of COVID-19.

For those who work all year, meetings will continue virtually for the unknown future and the demands of the fire season continue in certain regions. This is an election year which brings uncertainty for budgets and potential change, COVID-19 rates may begin to increase with the onset of cold weather, again forcing shutdowns. The indefinite lingering impacts of this virus create a challenge to mental health.

Regardless, it is essential to continue a healthy lifestyle, both mentally and physically.

If you dread the holidays and the likely stress ahead, consider viewing the holidays as an opportunity to enhance your psychological well-

being. There are many helpful steps you can take to lessen holiday stress and feel more optimistic about the season. You are not alone if you don't embrace the holiday cheer and looking at this time from a different lens might be a perfect alternative for you.

Perhaps, you are in the group that cherishes holidays, large family and friend gatherings and embracing cherished traditions. Those gatherings may be impacted by COVID-19 with seats empty at the table due to family members concerned about attending, thus postponing traditions for another year.

Here are some helpful ways to approach the season ahead.



## What Causes the Holiday Blues?

The holiday blues are feelings of sadness, stress, irritability that tend to occur around the holiday season. The season can be a source of depression, irritability, anxiety, despair, and regrets. Changes in family dynamics, problems at work, personal losses, grief, health concerns, and other issues can cause overwhelming feelings of sadness. Something as simple as your circadian rhythm being thrown off by the dwindling sunlight might be the culprit

([https://www.nigms.nih.gov/education/pages/Factsheet\\_CircadianRhythms.aspx](https://www.nigms.nih.gov/education/pages/Factsheet_CircadianRhythms.aspx)).

See more on Understanding Seasonal Affective Disorder at <https://www.webmd.com/depression/understanding-seasonal-affective-disorder-basics>.

Feeling blue and being depressed are not the same thing. Once the holidays are over and your normal routine resumes, seek help if you are still feeling depressed, especially if it has manifested into destructive behaviors.

You may be remembering those who were lost to a Line of Duty Death (LODD) this past year and perhaps feel a sense of guilt because you made it home for the holidays.

## Adapting to Social Norms and Expectations

Transitioning back to our family and society norms and expectations is often difficult once the fire season slows down and we reintegrate. As we take time away from work, we may be separated from our daily support base regardless of how much we enjoy time off. 2020 was another impactful year with many of us deploying to Australia during the winter months, COVID-19 impacting us in early spring, a fire season that went to PL5 that resulted in an endless shortage of resources early in the summer and for many of us has kept us away from our norms for longer than usual this year.

Some may feel a sense of isolation, even though family and friends surround you. Many of them do not and will not understand where you have been and what you have experienced over the past few months. Be patient with yourself – and with them. Recognize this is a typical reintegration stressor.

The season often brings unwanted guests. Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to your expectations. Try to set conversation boundaries, even if they are just yours. Before the gathering, identify your emotional triggers along with the people who tend to drain your energy. This can give you a better sense of direction once you walk into the room. Be respectful of friends and family struggling with the impacts and fears about COVID-19, accept that they may not all be present at holiday gatherings this year and make plans to connect with them in alternative ways. Set social distance boundaries that make you comfortable as you navigate COVID-19 and return to social norms.

Slow down at the dinner table. Chances are Christmas Dinner is not a short meal break before getting back to a long shift. Take your time and enjoy a slower pace.

Be mindful of top-down authority. If guests are late for an engagement, even though you said 1800, it is probably not that big of a deal. Enjoy opportunities where you are not required to be the decision-maker. Let someone else do it.

### *Holiday Blues cont.*

You worry about the isolated co-worker who is injured, depressed, or drinks to much. You worked as much overtime as you could to buy the best gifts, only to learn your significant other resents that you were not present most of the year or you find yourself alone this holiday season.

Balancing the chaos of shopping for presents, navigating crowds especially during COVID-19 can add to this stress but you are not alone.

The feelings and emotions that you may be experiencing are a personal journey and we may all be affected by different things, just know that your feelings of sadness are legitimate and you are not the only person who may not be looking forward to the holiday season.



## Navigating COVID-19 and the Holidays

Maybe COVID-19 gives you the easy excuse you desire for limiting yourself in social engagements but if you are one who relishes the big gatherings, this year may be a difficult challenge. After a long season of engaging in fire activities some of us crave those holiday moments surrounded by friends and family and feeling normal. Now you see these events threatened by the presence of COVID-19. Keep in mind that you can use this time to engage in more meaningful connections and find ways to still stay connected.

Here are some guidelines to holiday gatherings:

- Stay home if you do not feel well or are at higher risk.
- Keep gatherings small, take the time to choose your tribe of friends and family and hold smaller and more intimate gatherings. Take advantage of these close social moments to really enjoy and engage.
- Hold small gatherings outside if possible. Granted, that may be a challenge for some of us in -20-degree weather but think outside the box and find ways to engage. Consider this your challenge for the winter season: create inventive ways to engage socially but responsibly. Maybe you and a small group of friends meet at a You-Cut-Christmas tree farm and pick out trees, or perhaps you bundle up with a fire pit and an outdoor movie.
- Encourage guests to bring their own drinks and food. This will benefit you, as the host, as it will take the pressure off to provide food and beverages for your guests.

## Take Time for Yourself

It is okay to take time for yourself without feeling guilty. Be mindful and focus on the present rather than dwell on the past or worry about the future.

Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything that is going on. Find something that clears your mind, slows your breathing, and restores your calm.

Sometimes self-care is the best thing you can do, and others will benefit when you're feeling less stressed.

Many people either choose to spend the holidays alone or end up that way as a matter of circumstance. A solitary celebration is an excellent opportunity to create the holiday of your dreams. Today things are very different, and spending time home alone or taking a trip over the holidays can be a rewarding experience. A holiday does not need to be shared with others to be celebrated. It simply needs to be enjoyed.

Regardless, don't be held hostage by the holidays. Make time to rest, recharge, and do something you enjoy.

- Reflect on aspects of your life that give you joy.
- Think about the things you have rather than what you don't have.
- Too much holiday cheer such as alcohol can increase your stress.
- Be realistic. As families change and grow, traditions often change as well. Try to be flexible.
- Stick to a budget.
- It is okay to say no and cut back on commitments.
- Stay with your regular exercise routine.
- Manage expectations. Not everything is always perfect.
- Stay connected. For people who live far away from family members or who've recently lost loved ones, the holidays can be a lonely time. Reach out.
- Know your triggers and healthy ways to work through them.
- Remember, you may enjoy the holidays this year more than you thought you could.



## Seeking Assistance

If you are feeling excessively stressed and overwhelmed, consult with a licensed mental health professional. They can help you identify problem areas and assist in developing an action plan for changing them.

Click on the following links:

### Veterans Crisis Line

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

### Suicide Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

### National Alliance on Mental Illness Depression CBT Self Help App

[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.excelatlife.depression&hl=en\\_US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.excelatlife.depression&hl=en_US)



## Employee Assistance Program:

### DOI Employee Assistance Program

<https://www.espyr.com>

(password: interioreap)

800-869-0276

### USFS Employee Assistance Program

To access, contact your respective Employee Assistance Program provider or your coordinator as the providers are subject to change (see below for a list of coordinators).

- **Region 1, 6, and PNW:** ESPYR/EAP Consultants at (800) 869-0276
- **Region 4:** ComPsych at (888) 290-4327
- **All Other Units:** Federal Occupational Health (FOH) at (800) 222-0364
- **Job Corp Center and Washington Office detached/virtual employees** are to use the services where they are geographically aligned.

Find nearby psychologists by visiting APA's **Psychologist Locator** (<http://locator.apa.org/>).

Some links in this document will direct you to a non-government website that may have different policies from those of NWCG.