Cancer and the Holidays: How to Cope and Celebrate

Chances are, whether you are a patient or caregiver, you have been stronger in the past year than you thought you were capable of.

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The holidays can be a festive time, but for people dealing with cancer, they can also be stressful and full of anxiety. For many patients and their families, the thought of preparing for the season may be met with mixed emotions.

And while parties and gift-giving often go hand-in-hand with the holiday season, you might not have energy for either if you're going through cancer treatment. Nausea might make the thought of cookies and chocolate cream pie much less appealing, and just running a quick errand can leave you exhausted, never mind a marathon shopping trip.

To help you prepare, Dana-Farber clinicians provide some tips for coping — and celebrating — this holiday season.

Keep it simple

Baking cookies for your colleagues or children's teachers might have been easy in the past, but remember to pace yourself. You don't have to do it all. Pick one or two special traditions and then ask family and friends for help. Are you known for your big holiday bash? Plan a small potluck dinner instead. Make a list of what is most meaningful to you and prioritize. Some families even create new traditions through the process of treatment.

Take advantage of online resources

Crowded shopping malls may be filled with holiday cheer, but they are also rife with germs, especially in the middle of flu season. Shopping online lets you browse from your couch, and there's often an option to have gifts wrapped. Trying to save money? Invite friends over for gift wrapping or a cookie swap. Simple homemade gifts and cards, or even a phone call, are just as special.

You can also take advantage of e-cards for holiday greetings, grocery delivery services, or tools like Lotsa Helping Hands, an online community that helps patients organize friend and family

volunteers for all types of tasks.

Express yourself

Words like “Happy” and “Merry” seem to be everywhere: on the radio, TV, and as greetings in even small exchanges. Don’t feel obligated to be festive. Remember that it’s okay to show emotion — tears can bring a sense of relief. Pay attention to your own feelings and to signs of stress.

Joy may also be side-by-side with other emotions like sadness or frustration, and it can help to talk these through with a loved one or a professional counselor.

Pace yourself

Fatigue due to cancer treatment is a common problem, so try to balance activity with rest. Conserve your energy by planning activities when you typically feel at your best and be sure to make time to recover.

Learn more about managing cancer-related fatigue.

Embrace hope

Do something that catches your attention, gives you a break from worries, and renews your sense of hope and satisfaction with life. Watching a favorite movie together with friends, playing seasonal music, or even walking the dog can give you a sense of peace and hopefulness. Try to enjoy — and let go of — what you can.

Reinvent your rituals

Rituals are a central part of the holiday season for many families. But, while they can be comforting, they can also create an unrealistic vision for the “perfect” holiday.

Determine what your rituals are really about, and distill them down to their essence. If you usually bake cookies with your children, the value is spending time together. If baking is too tiring, try reading a holiday book as a family instead.

Ask for help

Don’t think in terms of what you “should” be doing, but rather what you want to do. It is okay to set limits, say no, and ask for help. If you previously hosted a family gathering, but cannot manage it this year, be honest with yourself and your family. You can ask a family member to host, instead, or invite friends and family over for a potluck. They may already be looking for a way to help, and your request will allow them to do so.

Practice healthy habits

It’s easy for anyone to let go during the holidays, but for cancer patients especially, it is vital to eat well, get enough sleep, and exercise. Take walks with your family and friends, and try recipes that are healthy and festive.

Listen to your emotions

Reflect on what you really want out of the holidays, and communicate that ahead of time to your family and friends so they can adjust their expectations. Share your emotions with loved ones or a professional rather than sweeping them under the rug.

Prepare for uncomfortable conversations

If you’re visiting family members you haven’t seen in a while, prepare them ahead of time for any changes in your appearance, such as weight or hair loss. Decide in advance how much information you want to offer, and consider preparing answers to uncomfortable questions they may ask so you aren’t caught off guard.

Think philanthropically

Studies have shown that helping others, even in a small way, can help us feel better. Donating winter coats, toys, or food to others in need can improve your mood and strengthen a family bond.

Chances are, whether you are a patient or caregiver, you have been stronger in the past year than you thought you were capable of. Take the end of the year to look back at your challenges, and notice the resilience you have displayed.

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