

Should You Cancel Your Holiday Gatherings This Year Because of COVID?

How to make hard choices and deal with pushy relatives

October 8, 2020 / [Mental Health](#)



The holidays are right around the corner, which means it's time for firming up plans. But with the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, those plans are going to look a lot different than usual.

Because of factors like travel complications and susceptible family members, there will be plenty of rethinking plans and, possibly, canceling them altogether, adding more anguish to a period already filled with immense stress.

Whether it's how to plan for gatherings, what to do if you can't see family or even if you and your family disagree about the best course of action, there could be tough choices ahead. So we talked to psychologist [Adriane Bennett, PhD](#), about how to approach a holiday season like no other.

Coping ahead

Whatever your decision winds up being, it's best to start planning for the holidays now, says Dr. Bennett. Besides the usual logistics issues, it's also important to start planning now so you can start assessing what those options are.

"It's good to start thinking about this now," she says. "In psychotherapy, we talk about 'coping ahead.' If a big event is coming up, don't wait until it happens. Start planning and coping now, which is especially good in this case because of all the uncertainty."

The CDC is thinking ahead, too, as they've recently [added comprehensive guidelines](#) for each holiday, offering general information about celebrations during the fall and winter as

well as assessments on potential activities based on risk-level. It's a terrific resource to keep handy as the holidays approach.

Assessing all of the risks

Some of the big things to consider, she says, are where you're traveling from and where you're traveling to. Local [COVID-19 guidelines](#) vary by state, county and even cities so it's important to be fully aware of the differences. It's also important to know caseloads in both your location of origin and destination because of extra precautions that might be needed.

There are [plenty of other concerns](#), Dr. Bennett adds, from at-risk members of your family (both the ones you're traveling with and ones you're planning on visiting) to the mode of transportation to what your plans are when you arrive. It's important to think about where you'll stay and, then, what the details of your family gatherings will actually be.

It's all about risk assessment, according to Dr. Bennett. "You need to think about your comfort level with traveling and your family's risk level and then think about the family members you're traveling to see and their risks."

Manage family expectations

Once you take these things into consideration, Dr. Bennett advises looking at family behavior, too. "Consider how the family you're thinking of visiting has behaved, whether or not they've been following precautions or attending crowded events. Consider how seriously they're taking it."

You should also look at the role and responsibility you play in the family holiday gathering, she adds. "You have to ask yourself if you're going because it's extremely important or if you're only going out of a sense of obligation," she says.

"If I'm hosting an event, like a family Thanksgiving, at my house, I have a very different role in trying to coordinate and make sure everybody's comfortable versus if I'm traveling as a guest," she adds.

You have to weigh these concerns against other responsibilities, she says, even if that risks hurting your family's feelings. "If I'm a parent and I have a child that has severe asthma, my role as a parent is to protect my child more than to protect my relatives' feelings."

Skiping the family gathering

If, after taking all of these risks into account, you decide to skip the holiday gathering, that's fine, Dr. Bennett says. It's important to keep your feelings, comfort and responsibilities at the forefront.

Your situation could also change suddenly. Whether it's a positive test or an onset of symptoms for either you or your family, it's possible that even the best-made plans might go sideways at the last minute. Dr. Bennett recommends talking about these possibilities ahead of time, too.

Confronting emotions

Once the decision has been made to forgo the holiday trip or skip the family gathering, you're going to have to cope not just with your own emotions, Dr. Bennett says, but your family's emotions, too.

"For both sides, acknowledging some of the negative emotions and the sadness or disappointment is important," she says. "Sometimes, people believe that ignoring emotions is the same as controlling them but it's not; it's just suppressing them"

Instead, she says, it's okay to admit that you're sad and disappointed and that you'll miss these events. But, she adds, it's entirely possible to still turn the holidays into a positive experience with alternative plans, even if they're not the plans you'd hoped for.

A change of plans

If you're looking for ideas of how to celebrate differently, Dr. Bennett notes the CDC's holiday guide breaks down

activities into low, moderate and high-risk categories for your consideration. But, beyond that, there are plenty of things to consider and it's important to be in the right frame of mind.

"When you're thinking about holiday rituals and adapting to new or different circumstances, ask yourself, again, if it's something meaningful to you or something that feels like an obligation," Dr. Bennett says. "If it's meaningful, think about how you can still recreate a version of that."

For instance, she says, if food is a meaningful part of your holiday experience and you live in close proximity to your family, consider a socially-distanced food exchange. "Even if you don't feel comfortable going to a family member's house for a long meal, maybe you can bake various dishes and drop them off, be it sides or treats," she points out.

Trading recipes online or sharing a meal together via Zoom or another video call option is also a way to keep the bonding going, leveraging digital technology with tradition.

This goes for other aspects of your celebration, too, Dr. Bennett says. "If there's a religious devotion your family likes to share or maybe just get together as a family and talk and reminisce, there are digital options for connecting."

It's important, she adds, to be flexible in your thinking.

"Some people can be very rigid about holidays but I would challenge that. Families and gatherings are always changing, things aren't always exactly the same year-to-year. Whether it's the birth of new members or the passing of others, marriages or other obligations like moves or being deployed in the military, things can look different every year. So maybe this year is just a different variation."

Dr. Bennett also encourages taking the opportunity to start new rituals and traditions. "A few years ago, my husband and some friends of ours decided we want to go out for sushi and wear ugly Christmas sweaters as part of our celebration and it turned into a thing every year. While circumstances may be a bit different with social distancing this year, there's still that opportunity to do something new and different."

What if my family doesn't understand?

Of course, we've seen a wide range of reactions to the pandemic, from those who [take it very seriously](#) to those who [treat it](#) like it's not such a big deal. And if you're being cautious and following all of the CDC's guidelines but your family is more dismissive, that could bring conflict if you decide to skip the festivities.

How to approach the conversation

If that's the situation you're likely to find yourself in, consider falling back on the "coping ahead" advice from Dr. Bennett. "If they're willing to cross boundaries and make you feel uncomfortable about this decision, the chances are they've done that before. It's possible it'll come from out of the blue, but letting them know well ahead of time can help prepare them for any emotional let-down."

Additionally, she says to keep in mind other points about your role in the family gatherings, your responsibility to your immediate family and your comfort level. "Be clear about those feelings and ask yourself what your goal in your conversation with your disagreeing family is. Is the goal for me to set a boundary and stick up for myself or my family?"

It's key, Dr. Bennett adds, that the debate doesn't drift away from your feelings and comfort level. "The goal isn't to have a debate about the validity of science or why wearing a mask is important. That's a tangent that could get you into an argument."

Instead, she says, it's about taking a stance of agreeing to disagree but setting your own personal boundaries. "You're saying, 'I have to do is right for me and my family.'"

She also says it's important that you make sure that the other person feels heard. "I would really talk to them about acknowledging their emotions, that they're hurt,

disappointed or angry. Or maybe they're irritated that the pandemic is exaggerated."

Still, Dr. Bennett says, it's about setting that boundary. "It's disappointing but it's important to tell them, 'Unfortunately with all the uncertainty, I think we're going to stay home this year for Thanksgiving or another holiday.'"

Suggest alternatives

Returning to those alternative ideas — having a zoom call or figuring out an alternate, safer gathering plan — could be beneficial, Dr. Bennett adds. "Give them a few days to think about it, to let it sink in, and then tell them that you still love them, you still care about them and that there are other ways to celebrate."

Accepting the inevitable

It's also important, she says, that there might not be any compromise and that your rebuffed family members might still be upset. "Some people are going to be unhappy no matter what. We probably all recognize that behavior in a relative and if that's how they've been in the past, that will probably be the case now."

For them, all you can do is tell them that you're sorry they're disappointed and that you're disappointed, too. "They have to cope with their own emotions," Dr. Bennett says. "You

have to accept they're just going to be unhappy and if that's how they're going to be, then you might as well do what you feel is best for you anyway."