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Holiday season can look different for everyone

Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Diwali, Winter Solstice, or simply spend time with loved ones — this time of year often brings gatherings, traditions, and social events.

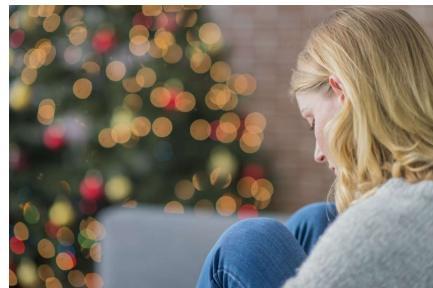
Regardless of faith, culture, or background, many people experience **an increase in expectations, family interactions, and routines around food.**

It's important to approach these experiences with **compassion for ourselves** and others, recognizing that the season can bring both joy and stress, especially for those in eating disorder recovery.

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## What the Research Suggests (snapshot)

- ▶ About **89%** of the US population say they feel **stressed** during the holiday season.
- ▶ **41%** say their **stress levels** are **higher** than at other times of year.
- ▶ Key holiday stressors include **financial demands** (gift-giving, hosting), **increase social/family obligations**, and **disruptions to normal routines**.



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## What the Research Suggests: Conflict and Loneliness

- ▶ **Thanksgiving Conflict-** 17% of Americans reported a political argument in 2024
- ▶ **31%** of adults under 30 said it is likely this year
- ▶ **35%** of Americans reported feeling **lonely** at some point during the holiday season
- ▶ **41%** reported feeling worried about someone else's loneliness



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## What the Research Suggests: Financial Stress

- ▶ **2 in 5** shoppers expect higher prices and are planning to scale back on travel and gifts
- ▶ **30%** of Americans are still paying off **last year's holiday debt**.
- ▶ Gallup 2025- Americans plan to spend about \$1007 of gifts



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## What the Research Suggests: Crisis-line demand

- ▶ Since the launch of 988- the first year in December 2021 to December 2022- the **calls increased 48%** and the **chats increased 263%** and the **texts increased 1,445%**
- ▶ December does have **lower suicide rates** than other months



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## Health Research

- ▶ **Cardiovascular events-** higher risk of **heart attacks- 37% increase** on Christmas Eve (stress, alcohol, diet, delays in care).
- ▶ **Alcohol-related harms-** alcohol related **ER** presentations increase on public holidays including **Christmas/New Year**. Heaviest drinking on holidays.
- ▶ **Weight changes-** people think it is 5 lbs, it is 0.8 lbs on average.

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## Body Image Research & The Holidays

- ▶ 2022 study at U of L Health found people may experience a **hyper-focus on body image** during the holidays (closet fitting, social media comparisons) and that comments by friends/family ("that shirt is tight.") can trigger body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, or ED relapse.
- ▶ Thomas et al. (2025) identified that body-image dissatisfaction peaked during Christmas, they looked at over 12 million social media posts and found this common theme.

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## People at Most Risk During the Holidays

- ▶ Individuals grieving a recent loss
- ▶ Those with mood disorders or SAD
- ▶ People in recovery from substance use
- ▶ Individuals with eating disorders

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## Why Holidays Can Trigger The Eating Disorder

- ▶ 1. Emotional & Environmental Triggers
- ▶ 2. Food-Related Stress
- ▶ 3. Routine Disruptions
- ▶ 4. Body Image Pressures
- ▶ 5. Stress & Expectations
- ▶ 6. Emotional & Psychological Impact
- ▶ Knowing our triggers can be protective factor



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## Emotional & Environmental Triggers

- ▶ Holiday gatherings often revolve around food, family, and social expectations.
- ▶ Unfamiliar environments or crowded settings can increase anxiety and loss of control
- ▶ Family tensions or **unresolved issues** may surface under stress. Family minimize the impact of the eating disorder.
- ▶ Pressure to appear cheerful or “**fine**” can cause emotional exhaustion.
- ▶ **Memories of past holidays** or difficult times can resurface feelings of guilt or sadness. “Trauma anniversaries”



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## Food-Related Stress

- ▶ Surrounded by large meals, desserts, and constant talk about eating or dieting.
- ▶ Buffets, potlucks, unfamiliar food
- ▶ Unstructured grazing; long gaps between meals
- ▶ Abundance of "fear foods"- seasonal treats or rich foods may trigger guilt, shame or urges to restrict, binge or purge.
- ▶ Limited ability to control food options, ingredients, or portions at gatherings.
- ▶ Fear of judgment for what or how much one eats. Pressure to eat what is offered.
- ▶ Diet-focused conversations ("I'm being so bad today") can be triggering.
- ▶ Expectations to "just eat normally" overlook the complexity of recovery.



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## Routine Disruption

- ▶ Regular meal plans, therapy sessions, and support systems are often interrupted
- ▶ Travel, parties, and changing schedules make consistent eating harder.
- ▶ Sleep disturbances and fatigue increase emotional reactivity.
- ▶ Reduced access to comfort/routine foods or recovery tools can create stress.
- ▶ Lack of privacy may make it difficult to use coping strategies.



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## Body Image Pressures

- ▶ Seeing relatives or friends after time apart often leads to **comments about appearance**
- ▶ **Social media** shows idealized “**holiday bodies**” and festive images, fueling comparison.
- ▶ Seasonal clothing or formal wear can heighten self-consciousness.
- ▶ Photos and family pictures can increase focus on body image.
- ▶ Weight changes become frequent conversation topics.



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## Stress & Expectations

- ▶ Pressure to buy gifts, host events, or travel increases overall stress.
- ▶ Financial strain can heighten anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.
- ▶ Overcommitment to social events leads to burnout.
- ▶ Desire to meet family expectations or **keep the peace** creates internal conflict.
- ▶ Feeling disconnected or *misunderstood* intensifies emotional distress



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## Emotional & Psychological Impact

- ▶ Feelings of shame or guilt if unable to meet holiday "norms" around food or behavior.
- ▶ Increased anxiety or depression due to loss of structure and higher stress.
- ▶ Fear of relapse or loss of progress in recovery.
- ▶ Emotional eating, restriction, or purging may resurface as coping mechanisms.
- ▶ Loneliness and isolation may worsen if one avoids gatherings to feel "safe."



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## Common Holiday Triggers

- ▶ January 'new me' messaging and diet culture
- ▶ Fitness Challenges, calorie talk & scale access
- ▶ Relatives' comments ('You look healthy', 'Are you eating that?')
- ▶ Alcohol at gatherings



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# Coping and Self-Care

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## Case Vignette 1: Navigating Holiday Comments About Weight

- ▶ It's Thanksgiving dinner, and the dining room is full of chatter, laughter, and the smell of food. Maddie, a 23-year-old woman in recovery from anorexia nervosa, is sitting at the table with her family. She's been doing well in treatment and is working hard on eating balanced meals again.
- ▶ As everyone starts passing the dishes around, her aunt—without any ill intent—smiles and says, "Wow, Maddie! You look great! It looks like you've put on some weight—so healthy!"
- ▶ Instantly, Maddie feels her heart race. The room seems to close in a little. The comment, meant as a compliment, stings. **Her eating disorder thoughts flare up: "They're all noticing. I've lost control. Everyone is judging me."**

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## In-the-Moment Coping Response

- ▶ Maddie takes a slow breath and grounds herself using one of her DBT skills—"STOP":
- ▶ **S: Stop.** Don't react immediately.
- ▶ **T: Take** a deep breath.
- ▶ **O: Observe** what she's feeling—shame, anxiety, tension.
- ▶ **P: Proceed** mindfully with what will help, not harm.
- ▶ She decides to respond briefly and neutrally:
- ▶ "Thanks, Aunt Lisa, I'm feeling healthier these days."
- ▶ Then she redirects the conversation:
- ▶ "How's your new job going?"
- ▶ This allows Maddie to maintain her boundary and shift the focus away from her body.

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## After-the-Moment Coping Strategies

- ▶ Later that evening, Maddie excuses herself to the bathroom and takes a few minutes to practice self-soothing and grounding:
- ▶ Reminds herself: **"My worth isn't defined by my body. Recovery means my body is healing."**
- ▶ Uses a coping card from therapy with affirmations like:
  - ▶ **"Comments about my body say more about others than about me."**
  - ▶ **"I am more than my appearance."**
- ▶ She e-mails her therapist or a trusted friend for support: "A family comment about weight came up tonight. I handled it, but I feel shaken."

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## Case Vignette 2: Comments About Food Choices at a Holiday Gathering

- ▶ At a Christmas Eve dinner, Sophie, a 25-year-old woman in recovery from bulimia nervosa, joins her extended family for the first time since completing a treatment program. She's been working hard on balanced eating, listening to her hunger cues, and following her meal plan without guilt.
- ▶ As she sits down with her plate filled with turkey, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and a small slice of pie, her cousin blurts out: "Wow, Sophie! You're eating all of that? That's a lot more than you used to eat!"
- ▶ Sophie freezes. Her stomach drops. She feels shame and self-consciousness flood in. The table suddenly feels like a spotlight is shining on her. Her automatic thought is, **"Everyone is watching me. I shouldn't eat this much."**

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## In-the-Moment Coping Response

- ▶ Sophie pauses and takes a slow breath. She reminds herself of her CBT coping statement:
- ▶ **"I deserve to nourish my body. This is part of my recovery."**
- ▶ She decides to respond calmly and redirect the situation:
- ▶ **"I'm following what feels right for me today. Recovery means enjoying all kinds of foods again."**
- ▶ Then she shifts the focus away from food:
- ▶ "By the way, your cookies look amazing—did you make them this year?"
- ▶ This keeps the tone kind but assertive, setting a boundary without escalating tension.

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## Case Vignette 3: Pressure to Try New Foods

Ethan is a 15-year-old boy in treatment for ARFID. At a holiday dinner, his grandmother keeps placing her casserole in front of him, insisting, “You’ve been to treatment—you should be able to eat this now.”

Other relatives chime in with, “Just try one bite,” and “What’s wrong with you?” Ethan feels embarrassed, overwhelmed, and frozen. The pressure intensifies his anxiety and shuts down his appetite, making it even harder to eat safely.

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## In-the-Moment Coping Responses

### How Ethan Can Cope in the Moment

- **Prepared Script:** “I’m following my treatment plan. I’m not ready for new foods right now.”
- **Use a pre-arranged signal** with a parent/sibling (touch your necklace, rub your hands) to let them know you need support.
- **Deep Breathing:** Slow inhale/exhale to calm the anxiety spike.
- **Brief Break:** Step away outside or hallway for grounding.
- **Grounding Technique:** Feel his feet on the floor or hold a fidget toy.
- **Self-Talk:** “I’m not failing. My plan is helping me heal, and it’s okay to go at my pace.”

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## Case Vignette 4: Pressure to Lose Weight

Maria is a 38-year-old woman in treatment for binge eating disorder (BED). At a holiday gathering, several family members make comments like, “Have you thought about starting Ozempic?” or “You should try one of those GLP-1 shots—they work for everyone.”

Others suggest she “really needs to lose weight this year,” leaving Maria feeling ashamed, judged, and tempted to isolate. She feels a surge of anxiety and an urge to binge later as a way to cope with the emotional discomfort.

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## In-the- Moment Coping Responses

### How Maria Can Cope in the Moment

- **Short Script:** “I’m working with my treatment team on a plan that’s right for me.”
- **Boundary Setting:** “I’m not discussing weight or medications today.”
- **Emotional Regulation:** Slow breathing or a quiet step outside to regroup.
- **Support Person:** Connect with someone who can redirect the conversation.
- **Grounding Skill:** Focus on one physical sensation (chew mint gum, hold something textured)
- **Self-Compassion:** “These comments are not about my worth. I’m allowed to protect my recovery.”

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## Case Vignette 5: Pressure Around Eating

Lily is a 19-year-old in eating disorder recovery. At a holiday dinner, her grandmother keeps encouraging her to “eat more” and watches everything she puts on her plate. Other relatives comment on what she is or isn’t eating.

Lily feels overwhelmed, embarrassed, and trapped. Her heart races, she loses her appetite, and she feels the urge to shut down or leave the room.

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## In-the- Moment Coping Responses

### How Lily Can Cope in the Moment

- **Deep Breathing:** Slow breaths to regulate anxiety before responding.
- **Prepared Script:** “I’m working on my meal plan with my care team—thank you for caring.”
- **Use a Support Person:** Text a trusted friend for a quick grounding message
- **Brief Break:** Step away to the bathroom or another room for grounding.
- **Grounding Skill:** Run cold water over your hands for 5-10 seconds, or hold an ice cube wrapped in a napkin
- **Self-Talk:** “I’m allowed to follow my plan. I’m doing what’s best for my recovery.”

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## Case Vignette 6: GLP-1 Discussion at the Holiday Gathering

- ▶ During a family holiday dinner, Sarah, who is in recovery from an eating disorder, sits next to her cousin Amy. As the family eats, Amy starts talking about how she's been taking a GLP-1 medication (like Ozempic or Wegovy) and has lost a lot of weight. Amy proudly talks about how little she eats now and how "it's finally easy to control cravings." Other family members join in, asking questions and complimenting Amy on how "amazing" she looks.
- ▶ Sarah starts feeling her stomach twist. She feels both jealous and ashamed. Old thoughts come flooding back—**"Maybe I should go back to dieting" or "I'm out of control."** She suddenly feels anxious about what's on her plate and wishes she hadn't eaten dessert.

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## Coping Strategies

### Tools Sarah can use:

- ▶ **Grounding:** Pause, take a few slow breaths, and notice where you are—feel your feet on the ground, the chair supporting you.
- ▶ **Self-Talk:** Remind yourself, "Their body and choices are not mine. My body deserves nourishment."
- ▶ **Shift the Topic:** Politely redirect the conversation ("I'm glad that's working for you, Amy. How's work been lately?").
- ▶ **Post-Event Reflection:** Journal or talk with a support person afterward about what feelings came up and how to protect recovery next time.

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## Case Vignette 7: Grazing and Guilt After Eating

- ▶ Lena spends the afternoon at a friend's holiday open house where food is everywhere—cookies, dips, appetizers, desserts. Throughout the evening, she picks at things without paying much attention—one bite here, another there. When she gets home, she realizes she's eaten more than she planned. The guilt hits immediately. She feels stuffed and ashamed, thinking, "I've ruined everything," and considers skipping meals the next day.
- ▶

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## Coping Strategies

### What can Lena do to cope:

- ▶ **Pause and Name the Feeling:** Guilt and shame are not signs of failure—they're signals to use compassion.
- ▶ **DBT Skill – Radical Acceptance:** Accept what happened without judgment. One day or one meal does not define recovery.
- ▶ **CBT Skill – Reframe the Thought:** Replace "I messed up" with "I nourished myself and can make balanced choices tomorrow."
- ▶ **Self-Soothing:** Try a gentle walk, listen to calming music, or do deep breathing to reconnect with your body.
- ▶ **Reach Out:** Share with your therapist or support group how these feelings show up after unstructured food events.

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## Lets Review Our Skills: CBT Skills — Changing Thoughts

- ▶ **Catch the Thought:** Notice when you're thinking in all-or-nothing terms (e.g., "I ruined everything by eating dessert").
- ▶ **Challenge It:** Ask, "What's the evidence this thought is true?" or "Is there another way to see this?"
- ▶ **Replace It:** Create a more balanced statement ("One meal doesn't define my progress").
- ▶ **Reality Check:** Focus on facts, not feelings — feelings are valid, but they aren't facts.
- ▶ **Gratitude Shift:** Write or say one small thing you appreciate about the moment to re-center your mindset.



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## DBT Skills — Coping in the Moment

- ▶ **STOP Skill:** Stop, Take a step back, Observe, Proceed mindfully — choose what helps recovery, not what harms.
- ▶ **TIP Skills for intense emotions:** **Temperature** (cool down, splash water on your face, place a cold washcloth on your forehead or neck, hold an ice cube), **Intense exercise** (move your body, 30-60 seconds of fast movement, jump in place, jumping jacks-this is not a work-out!), **Paced breathing** (4-6 inhale for 4 secs, exhale for 6 secs, 1 breath per 6-8 seconds, hand on chest + belly).
- ▶ **Self-Soothing:** Use your five senses — music, candlelight, soft texture, calming scents, or a warm drink.
- ▶ **Radical Acceptance:** Remind yourself, "I may not like this moment, but I can accept that it's happening."

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## How to Use These Skills During the Holidays



- ▶ **Before an event:** review your plan and pick one skill you'll use.
- ▶ **During:** if anxiety spikes, pause, breathe, use STOP or TIP.
- ▶ **After:** reflect — what skill helped? What could you try next time?
- ▶ Keep a "skills card" in your phone or pocket as a quick reminder.
- ▶ **Remember:** using even one small skill is progress, not perfection.

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## Coping Strategies for Holiday Gatherings-During an Event

- ▶ Take **three slow**, deep **breaths** before joining a meal or social event to calm your body.
- ▶ Have an **exit plan** or phrase (e.g., "I need a quick break") if you feel triggered or overwhelmed.
- ▶ **Bring a grounding tool:** journal, fidget item, coloring page, or music to refocus your mind. Soothing rock
- ▶ **Practice mindful eating** — notice smells, textures, and flavors without judgment.
- ▶ **Set clear boundaries with others** (e.g., avoid diet or body talk) and rehearse supportive responses.
- ▶ If **anxiety rises**, focus on one **sensory detail**: what you see, hear, feel, or smell in that moment.



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## If Tools Don't Work: If an Event Goes Sideways



Shame → empathy & self-compassion



Return to the next planned meal/snack



Debrief with therapist/RD;  
update the plan



Small corrective behaviors,  
not punishment- learn from it!



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## How Loved One's and Family Can Offer Support During the Holidays



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## Ways to Support a Family Member During the Holidays

- ▶ **Be present, not perfect** — your calm presence matters more than saying the right thing.
- ▶ **Ask open questions:** 'How can I make this easier for you today?' or 'Would it help if we planned meals together?'
- ▶ **Focus on connection, not food** — suggest activities like games, walks, or watching a movie together.



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## Ways to Support a Family Member During the Holidays

- ▶ **Model calm eating** and avoid labeling foods as 'good' or 'bad.'
- ▶ **Respect boundaries** — if your loved one declines a food or event, accept it without judgment.
- ▶ **Validate feelings:** 'I can see this is really hard for you, and I'm here for you.'



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## Supporting a Loved One with an Eating Disorder: Do's and Don'ts

- ▶ ☒ Offer empathy and listen more than you talk.
- ▶ ☒ Encourage professional help and ongoing recovery support.
- ▶ ☒ Keep mealtimes as low-stress as possible — talk about neutral topics.
- ▶ ☒ Compliment non-appearance qualities like kindness, humor, or strength.
- ▶ ☒ Celebrate small victories ('You showed up today — that matters!').



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## Supporting a Loved One with an Eating Disorder: Do's and Don'ts

- ▶ ☒ Don't comment on weight, body size, or what someone eats.
- ▶ ☒ Don't try to force food or 'fix' the problem yourself.
- ▶ ☒ Don't talk about diets, calories, or your own body.
- ▶ ☒ Don't minimize their experience ('Just eat — it's not that hard').
- ▶ ☒ Don't use guilt ('You're ruining the holiday for everyone').



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## When to Worry: Red Flags Requiring More Support

Rapid weight change; vitals concerns, medical instability; fainting

Escalating restriction/binge/purge/compulsive exercise

Suicidal thoughts; self-harm urges, social isolation

Increased anxiety and frequent comments about feeling guilty

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## Recovery Holiday Toolkit

### 1. Plan Ahead-

**Identify triggers:** Think about specific situations or people that increase stress (e.g. comments about good, weight, or appearance).

**Have a plan:** discuss with your therapist, dietitian or support person how to handle those moments.

**Structure helps:** try to maintain your regular meal plan as closely as possible, even when travel or events change your routine.

**Bring familiar foods:** pack snacks or sides that feel comfortable if you are unsure what will be available

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## Workplace & School Planning

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Navigate parties/potlucks with a buddy plan

2

Communicate needs to supervisors/teachers

3

Request accommodations as appropriate

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## Travel & Routine Protection



Pack shelf-stable snacks; time-zone meal alarms



Maintain meds/supplements schedule



Protect sleep: earplugs, eye mask, wind-down routine



Virtual sessions/support groups if traveling

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## Recovery Holiday Toolkit



### 2. Communicate Boundaries:

practice gentle phrases ahead of time:



"I'd rather not talk about food or my body today."



"Let's focus on something other than what's on our plates."



"I appreciate your care, but I'm working on trusting my body again."

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## Boundaries & People Plans



Talk in advance-let trusted family members know what you need before gathering



Be specific and kind-people often mean well but don't know what's triggering



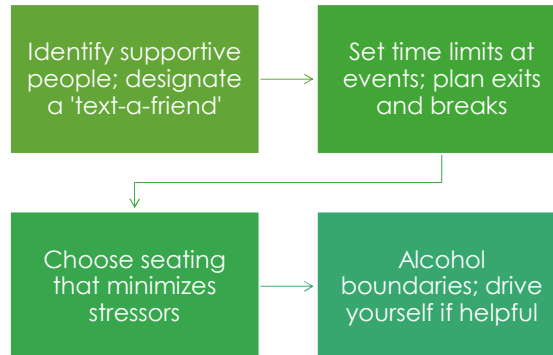
Set clear conversation boundaries



Avoid food or body talk- if someone makes a comment- "I'd rather not talk about my body or food. How's work going for you?"

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## Boundaries & People Plans



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## Recovery Holiday Toolkit



### 3. Manage Mealtime Stress:



**Grounding tools:** try deep breathing, naming five things you can see or using a calming scent or a fidget toy.



**Shift focus:** engage in table conversation unrelated to food (talk about travel, music, etc.).



**Excuse yourself briefly:** it's okay to take a short break or step outside to regroup.

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## Manage Mealtime Stress: Meal Planning may be very helpful

Pre-commit to 3 meals + 1–3 snacks (or your plan)

Plate building with your RD's guidance

Decide portions ahead; use visual cues rather than calories

Schedule supportive check-ins before/after meals

Bring comfort options if needed while still practicing flexibility

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## Recovery Holiday Toolkit

### 4. Reframe negative thoughts:

Unhelpful thought- "I have to eat perfectly"

Helpful thought- "My recovery is about progress, not perfection."

Unhelpful thought- "I don't deserve to enjoy food."

Helpful thought- "Nourishing myself is an act of self-care."

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## Reframe Negative Thoughts: January Diet Culture Defense

- 1  
Avoid appearance-based resolutions
- 2  
Set process goals (therapy attendance, consistent meals)
- 3  
Mute/unfollow diet content; add pro-recovery voices
- 4  
Plan a 'media detox week' in early January

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## Recovery Holiday Toolkit



**5. Stay connected to support:**  
keep daily contact with your treatment team if possible.



**Lean on your community:**  
attend support groups, on-line meetings or recovery friends.



**Create a "holiday support list"**-  
3 people you can reach out to if you feel overwhelmed.

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## Stay Connected With Your Support Team

-  Share holiday calendar; schedule extra check-ins
-  Clarify med refills and travel letters if needed
-  Agree on relapse plan & parameters for higher care

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## Recovery Holiday Toolkit

### 6. Prioritize self-care:

- Schedule quiet downtime between gatherings
- Do grounding activities, walks, stretching, journaling or listening to music.
- Set boundaries around social media- unfollow or mute content that triggers comparison.
- Enjoy connection over consumption.
- Practice daily affirmations.

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## Self Care & Movement: Gentle, Non-Compulsive

### Prioritize

- Prioritize recovery-aligned movement (walks, stretching)

### Skip

- Skip 'earn/burn' narratives; move for mood/connection

### Have

- Have a rest-day plan and accountability



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## Self-Care & Body Image During the Holidays

### Clothing

- Clothing that fits now; comfort over sizes

### Curate

- Camera & mirror boundaries; curate social feeds

### Practice

- Practice body neutrality/compassion statements



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## Summary: Self-Care Toolkit

- ▶ **Stick to your recovery structure** — meal plans, therapy sessions, and support check-ins.
- ▶ **Plan daily self-care:** journaling, coloring, listening to music, or a warm bath.
- ▶ **Take a walk outdoors** — even 10 minutes of fresh air helps reset your mood.
- ▶ **Use grounding or relaxation techniques:** deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or mindfulness apps.
- ▶ **Limit time on social media** if comparisons or diet talk are triggering.
- ▶ **Journal nightly** about what went well and one thing you're grateful for.
- ▶ **Share your boundaries** and needs with supportive people ahead of gatherings



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## Q&A

QUESTIONS, REFLECTIONS, NEXT STEPS

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