



10 Ways to Maintain Mental Wellness During the Holidays

Written by Merilee Kern, MBA

The holiday season can be a beautiful time to celebrate love and life, but for many people the holidays are also incredibly stressful. There are extra demands on our already limited time and energy, and facing isolation or difficult family dynamics can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and trigger unhealthy behaviors like alcohol and drug use.

For those of us who are working on our mental wellness, the holidays are often filled with challenges. It is no coincidence that alcohol and drug misuse skyrocket during the holidays, as well as feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

However, with some thought and planning, you can prepare yourself to enjoy the holidays while maintaining your mental wellness goals. Prioritizing your health and wellbeing during the holidays will not only help you feel better during this difficult season, but will also strengthen your wellness journey in the long term.

Below, renowned neurologist Dr. Antonello Bonci, Executive Chairman and Founder of the GIA Miami Mental Health and Addiction Treatment Center, offers 10 tips to help people prioritize mental wellness and effectively cope with triggers that can cause depression—particularly during the stressful holiday season.

Know your triggers. Understanding the people, places, objects and environments that cause you stress, anxiety or craving for substances like alcohol or drugs can help you avoid and manage those triggers during the holidays. Emotions are often the most powerful triggers, and the holidays are filled with activities and interactions that can lead to feelings of stress, guilt, shame, resentment and even anger and confrontation with friends and family members. By recognizing your personal triggers, you are taking the first step towards being able to manage your feelings and avoid resorting to unhealthy behaviors.

Know your limits. The holidays are often overwhelming. Become familiar with your emotional limits and respect them when

you need a break. Practice self-reflection and learn to recognize when you are feeling stressed or taking on too much. Set a timer on your phone (even a silent one) to remind yourself to conduct regular check-ins with your emotions. When you recognize that you are not feeling your best, take time for a “mental wellness break” or try to distance yourself from the situation that may be triggering you or contributing to negative emotions.

Have a plan. You know the holidays are going to be stressful. Before you feel anxious and overwhelmed, create a plan on how you are going to manage difficult situations. Maybe that family party always involves drinking or champagne toasts. Be ready with a non-alcoholic drink in hand. Make time to exercise and fill yourself with healthy foods like vegetables, nuts, lean protein and healthy sweets like dark chocolate early in the evening (or even before you attend a party), so that you will be less likely to indulge in unhealthy choices—and guilt that can often follow. Prepare mindfulness or grounding strategies like deep breathing to practice in quiet moments. Plan to spend time with a pet or go outside for a breath of fresh air when you need it. If you know alcohol or drugs will be at a party, be prepared to leave before the evening gets late, when you know people are more likely to lose control.

Reflect on the past and your dreams for the future. You have already dedicated a lot of time and hard work to your mental wellness journey. Reflect on how far you have come. Talk with people who support you and take pride in each other’s mental health accomplishments. Before you make an unhealthy choice during a time when you are stressed or overwhelmed, try to pause and imagine what that choice will mean for your future. Are you risking the hard work and progress that you have made? Is that choice right for the person you are becoming? Does it align with the path you want to walk? Envision your dreams for your future and hold that image in your mind during difficult times. Consider carrying a small token in your pocket or a reminder of your goals with you (set the

background of your phone or wear a special bracelet) to draw strength from during stressful moments.

Draw your boundaries

Be prepared to say “no” to the extra holiday activity, to the alcoholic drink or unhealthy food, and to anything that conflicts with who you are today and who you want to be on your mental wellness journey. Anyone who is upset with you for setting your boundaries and saying “no” is upset because you are showing them that they can no longer control you. Respect yourself and put your needs and goals first. The same people who are upset with you for drawing your boundaries in the short term will have more respect for you in the long term, too.

Practice self-care and gratitude.

Often, we feel pressured to support other people during the holidays, but it is important to take the time to take care of yourself as well. You have put in so much work into your recovery journey and you deserve to protect that. Write down reasons that you are grateful for where you are in your life now and what has helped you get here. Schedule time to take care of yourself in any way that is meaningful to you. Cook a nice meal for yourself. Go for a walk on your favorite outdoor path. Take a long bath, watch a favorite movie, dance to your favorite music or read that book that you’ve been meaning to get around to. Play! If you have a hard time prioritizing yourself, enlist a friend for a self-care “date” and practice self-care at a set time together.

Tap your support network. The holidays are a great reason to spend extra time with the people who love and support you. Use the holiday season to grow your mental wellness support network. Plan check-ins with a wellness buddy before and after holiday events like family or work parties. Commit to an extra group meeting or outing with your support network. Tell people in your support network where you are going and talk about what might worry or stress you. Be available for friends who are prioritizing their mental wellness too. Practice recognizing your limits, saying ‘no’, and making mental wellness plans together (see #3



above). Let yourself be held accountable by those who understand where you have been and what you are going through.

Shift your priorities and try something new. In many cultures the holidays are used as a time to over-indulge in unhealthy behaviors. Set aside time to reflect on what the holidays mean to you. If you have used the holidays to overindulge in the past, how did that make you feel? Is that what you want out of this season, or are there other ways you want to celebrate this time of year? Maybe you would rather prioritize the new, healthier version of yourself that you have worked so hard to create. Cultivate a new tradition like going to a yoga class, a healthy brunch with friends, a ritual like meditation, or any other activity that aligns with the person you are becoming on your wellness journey.

Nourish your soul. The holidays are often associated with rituals and traditions that can be religious in nature. If past traditions align with the person

you are becoming on your wellness journey, immerse yourself in those holiday rituals and activities that bring you comfort and enhance your mental wellness. If traditions of the past no longer serve you, find new ways to nourish your soul during the holiday season. Try to find activities that bring you fulfillment and satisfaction through helping others. Put yourself in service of others in need by volunteering at a local homeless shelter, prepare meals for the elderly, serve at a local pet shelter or donate gifts to children in need.

Forgive. During the holidays there is often a pressure for everything to be “perfect.” If you return to alcohol or drug use or make a poor choice for your mental wellness during this season, do not give up. Try to learn from the mistake and forgive yourself. Use the tips above, ask for support from people you trust, and get professional help when you need it to get back on the right path for your wellness journey.

If you or a loved one are dealing with alcohol or drug use, anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns, strategies like those

offered above can help. Dr. Bonci, and other of the world-class field experts at GIA Miami, have pioneered innovative techniques that encompass a whole mind-brain-body approach. So, this season put these tips to task to help find the best version of you. There's perhaps no greater gift.

About Merilee Kern, MBA

Forbes Business Council Member Merilee Kern, MBA is an internationally regarded brand analyst, strategist and futurist. As a prolific branding and marketplace trends pundit, Merilee reports on titans of industry: change makers, movers, shakers and innovators across all categories, both B2C and B2B. Merilee's cross-media platform work reaches an audience in the multiple millions each month through an array of broadcast TV programs, print and online publications as well as terrestrial radio. Connect with her at TheLuxeList.com and SavvyLiving.tv Instagram @LuxeListReports Twitter @LuxeListReports Facebook: Facebook.com/LuxeListReports LinkedIn: LinkedIn.com/in/MerileeKern.