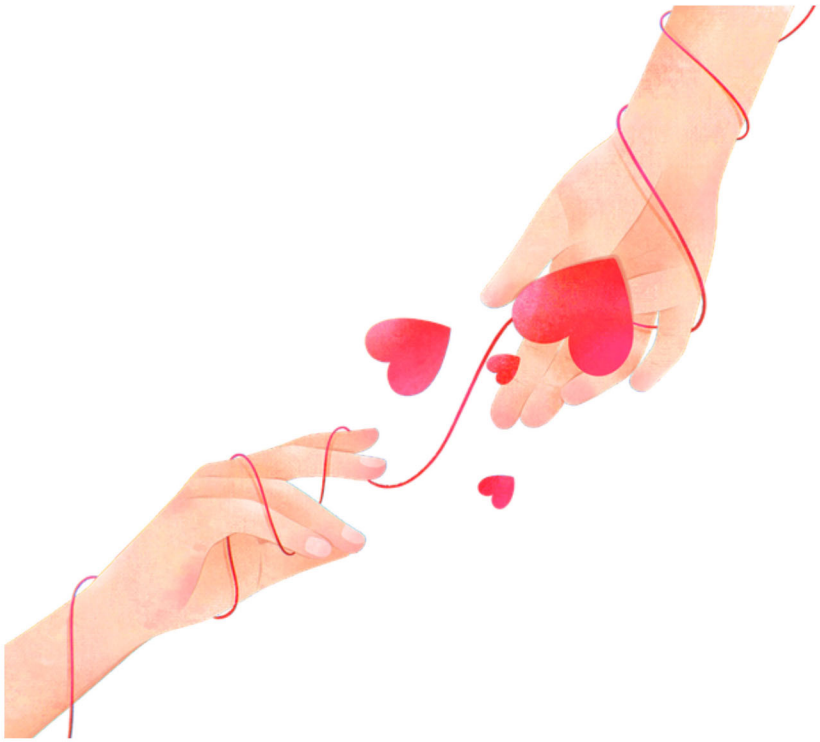
HOLIDAY SURVIVAL GUIDE

A compassionate guide for survivors navigating the holiday season.



You deserve to experience the holidays in a way that feels safe, manageable, and meaningful.

https://www.hope4-recovery.org

Inside this Guide

- Permission to feel what you feel
- Boundaries and difficult gatherings
- Coping with triggers and emotional overwhelm
- Food-related stress, grief, loneliness, and finances
- A personal plan and support resource

The holidays can bring joy, connection, and meaningful traditions. They can also bring difficult memories, grief, stress, loneliness, and reminders of painful experiences. Whatever you are feeling this season, you do not have to force yourself to feel happy or participate in traditions that don't feel right for you.

You are allowed to take the holidays one moment at a time.

You do not have to pretend you are okay to make other people comfortable.

1. Give Yourself Permission to Feel

The holidays often come with expectations about how we are supposed to feel. You may feel pressure to be happy, grateful, excited, or connected. Your feelings do not have to match the expectations of the season. Sadness, anger, anxiety, grief, numbness, or mixed emotions are all valid.

Try to:

- Give yourself permission to not feel festive.
- Allow emotions without judging yourself for having them.
- Take things one day at a time; let go of expectations of a perfect holiday.
- Remember you do not have to explain your feelings to everyone

2. Setting Boundaries During the Holidays

You have the right to decide what feels comfortable and safe. Boundaries may include:

- Saying no to invitations or choosing not to spend time with someone who has hurt you.
- Limiting how long you stay or arranging your own transportation.
- Declining hugs, kisses, or other physical affection.
- Asking others not to discuss certain topics.
- Leaving a situation when you feel uncomfortable, or choosing not to celebrate.

You are allowed to change your mind, even if you previously agreed

Boundary-setting phrases

- “I'm not comfortable discussing that right now.”
- “I won't be able to make it this year.”
- “I'm only able to stay for a little while.”
- “I'm not comfortable with hugs.”
- “I need some time to myself.”
- “Let's talk about something else.”

You do not have to push through discomfort just because it is a holiday.

3. Preparing for Difficult Situations

Knowing what to expect can make stressful situations feel more manageable. If you anticipate a difficult gathering, consider making a plan ahead of time.

Before

- Identify people or situations that may be triggering.
- Decide how long you want to stay; arrange transportation if possible.
- Identify a safe person to check in with and plan how to leave.
- Decide what topics or interactions you want to avoid.

During

- Take breaks; step outside or find a quiet space.
- Use grounding strategies and check in with how you are feeling.
- Remind yourself that you have choices.

After

- Give yourself time to decompress.
- Engage in something comforting and reach out to someone supportive.
- Allow yourself to rest rather than moving immediately to another obligation

4. Coping With Triggers and Overwhelming Emotions

Music, smells, decorations, conversations, and family interactions may bring up unexpected memories or feelings. You deserve compassion when that happens.

Coping strategies to try

- Grounding: Notice what you can see, hear, feel, smell, or taste in the present.
- Breathing: Take slow, gentle breaths; let your exhale be a little longer.
- Movement: Walk, stretch, dance, or move in a way that feels comfortable.
- Creative expression: Journal, draw, craft, or listen to music.
- Sensory comfort: Blanket, comforting object, warm drink, or calming sounds.
- Take a break: Pause, leave the room, or step away.

Different strategies work for different people. Choose what feels helpful in the moment.

You are not alone, and you deserve support without judgment.

5. Food, Body Image, and Holiday Gatherings

For people experiencing eating disorders, disordered eating, body image concerns, or anxiety around food, meals and gatherings may feel stressful, especially when there are comments about food, weight, appearance, or pressure to eat in front of others. You deserve to participate without feeling judged or pressured.

- Identify people who can support you before, during, or after a gathering.
- Practice responses to comments about your body or eating habits.
- Redirect conversations about food or appearance.
- Maintain routines and coping strategies that support your well-being.
- Take breaks and reach out if you are struggling.

Boundary phrases

- “I'd prefer not to talk about my eating habits.”
- “Comments about my body aren't helpful to me.”
- “I'm focusing on enjoying time together.”

6. Loneliness, Grief, and Financial Stress

The holidays can highlight the absence of loved ones, relationship changes, or a lack of support. Financial pressure may also come from expectations around gifts, travel, or celebrations.

If you are feeling lonely

- Reach out to a friend, support group, or someone you trust.
- Try a community event or volunteer activity if it feels meaningful.
- Plan something enjoyable; create traditions that reflect what you want.
- Spend time with people who make you feel safe and accepted.

If you are experiencing financial stress

- Set a realistic budget and consider free or low-cost activities.
- Remember gifts are not a measure of your love or worth.
- Give yourself permission to decline financially stressful plans.
- Focus on connection rather than spending.

If you are grieving, you might honor someone through a candle, memory, song, or new tradition, or choose not to do anything at all.

You deserve to make choices that honor your healing, your values, and your well-being.

7. Creating Holidays That Feel Right for You

You are allowed to redefine what the holidays mean to you. You do not have to continue traditions that bring pain, stress, or discomfort simply because they have always been part of your life.

You might choose to:

- Spend the holiday with friends instead of family.
- Have a quiet day at home, volunteer, or enjoy a hobby.
- Create a new tradition or celebrate on a different day.
- Skip certain holidays altogether.

Ask yourself

- What would make this holiday feel more manageable?
- What traditions do I genuinely enjoy?
- What am I doing because I want to, and what feels like obligation?
- What would prioritizing my needs look like this season?

8. My Holiday Self-Care Plan

Take a few minutes to consider what support and coping strategies you may need. You can write these down, whether it's on your computer, on your notes app, or on a piece of paper.

- My potential triggers this season: _____
- My potential triggers this season: _____
- My boundaries for the holidays: _____
- People I can reach out to for support: _____
- Coping strategies that help me feel grounded: _____
- Things I can do if I need to leave a situation: _____
- Something I want to do for myself this holiday season: _____

Support & Resources

You do not have to navigate difficult moments alone. These resources offer support and connections to services.

National Domestic Violence Hotline
Call: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) Text: START to 88788
Website: thehotline.org
Support, safety planning, and referrals for people experiencing domestic violence.

RAINN — National Sexual Assault Hotline
Call: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) Text: HOPE to 64673
Website: rainn.org/hotline
Free, confidential support for survivors of sexual violence, available 24/7.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call or text: 988 Website: 988lifeline.org
Free, confidential crisis support for emotional distress, mental health concerns, substance use concerns, or suicidal thoughts. Available 24/7.

United Way 2-1-1
Dial: 211 Website: 211.org
Connects with local community resources, including food, housing, transportation, and other support services.

If you are in immediate danger, call 911 if it is safe to do so.

A final reminder
You have survived difficult experiences, and you deserve compassion as you navigate this season. Healing does not mean every holiday will feel easy. You are learning to honor your needs, make choices for yourself, and create moments of safety and connection.

You do not have to do everything. You do not have to attend everything. You do not have to feel everything all at once.

You deserve peace, safety, connection, and the freedom to celebrate (or not celebrate) in a way that feels right for you.

Resource information verified November 2026.
Services and availability may change; check each organization's website for current options.

Web resources: thehotline.org • rainn.org • 988lifeline.org • 211.org

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