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Minding Your Health - Managing Holiday Stressors

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It's the holiday season and time to visit with family. How wonderful! ... Or is it?

This can be a joyful, but trying time of year for anyone. While daydreams of holly and mistletoe may warm our hearts, anticipating Uncle Joe's overindulgence in the eggnog and Aunt Thelma's political ranting can leave us cold.

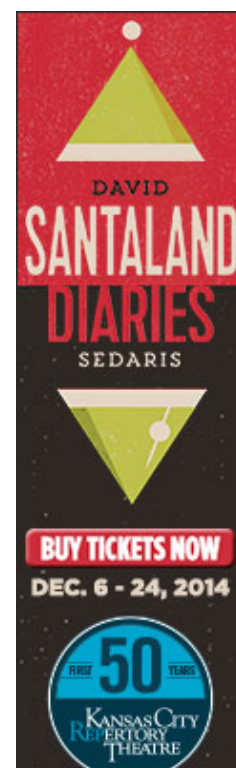
The unique stress of the holidays is only compounded when you feel you can't be your genuine self or when there seems to be an air of disapproval swirling around you. Perhaps your partner is only reluctantly invited, treated coolly, or even excluded from family gatherings. Old hurts and irritants may resurface when families get together.

The holidays are also a time when religious beliefs and customs are more openly displayed and shared. Although attitudes are improving, the exclusionary or discriminatory practices of some religious organizations and faiths may be more noticeable during the holiday season. Old-fashioned value systems and beliefs that were imprinted into our minds as children may remind us of painful feelings and experiences.

What helps get us through these times? As with any time of year, it is so important to have a good support system. If you already have a good network of friends and confidants, reach out to them. Otherwise, create a safety net for yourself by connecting with the individuals and groups who will be there for you during difficult moments. This may include empathetic family members, close friends, or people who belong to your special interest groups.

Remember that there is only so much that is within your control and that others' words and actions don't define you. Although most of us long to be validated by our family and friends, letting go and accepting others as they are can lift a load from our shoulders and hearts. Step back and take a look at your own roles and behaviors at family gatherings to identify any problematic patterns. Receiving with gratitude what is given, regardless of how small – a smile, a gift, a meal, a gathering – can plant seeds that grow into more positive behaviors. Having compassion and understanding for others can be challenging, but helpful.

Plan ahead for the extra support you may need during this time of year. Support groups may be available that will address your specific concerns. In addition, crisis lines are open 24 hours a day. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays ([PFLAG](#)), 12-step groups, and some churches can be good places to establish connections. Those who suffer from mental illness may find the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) to be a great referral source for help locally at



816-931-0030 or nationally at 800-950-NAMI (6264). You can also visit [Kansas City Mental Health](#) to access local therapists, support groups, crisis line numbers, workshops and wellness events.

It can be a relief to look outside yourself and lend a helping hand to others when you are feeling down. Gather supplies to deliver to local shelters, visit someone who is alone for the holidays, or help serve a seasonal meal for the homeless. Do you remember what it was like for you when you were a youth? Volunteer at Passages ([KC Passages](#)) to support LGBT youth.

Being assertive, setting boundaries, and staying true to your genuine self may not be appreciated by critical others, but it is the only truly sustainable way of being. Therapy, support groups, and friends can help you walk this journey toward living an authentic life when your family cannot accept you.

A good therapist can be a big help in managing holiday stress. If you do not have a therapist and feel that you need one, find one who will affirm you through the LGBT-Affirmative Therapists Guild ([LGBT Therapists Guild](#)). When all efforts have failed and your family of origin is unable to accept you the way you are, perhaps it's time to celebrate the season with the friends who have become your "family of choice."

As we prepare for the holiday season, establish or reach out to support resources, focus on what is within your control, and, if you need to, create your own unique holiday tradition with your "family of choice." Happy holidays!

Martha Childers, EdS, LPC, and Tracy Ochester, PsyD, are sole practitioners and members of the LGBT-Affirmative Therapists Guild ([LGBT Therapists Guild](#)). Childers Counseling Service ([Childers Counseling Service](#)) is in the Country Club Plaza, and Ochester's office -- [MindfulKC \(MindfulKC\)](#) -- is in Leawood.

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