

Mental Health Check-In: Christmas Coping

If you moved away for college, chances are you made plans to come home for the holidays- which can bring up feelings of excitement, anxiety, or both. During the semester you've spent time on your own, settling into a new life and routine. Maybe you've met new friends, changed up your look, or even gained new perspectives- and you might not feel like you're the same person you were when you first left home.

Depending on your situation, coming home for the holidays can feel exciting, strange, overwhelming, or all of the above. Coming home for the holidays is about reconnecting with those still at home. So, whether you're looking forward to visiting home and returning to a familiar space, or the thought of visiting home stresses you out- here are some tips to help you prepare before you leave, and help you cope when you get there.

Get connected to free mental health resources for college students

With the end of the semester approaching you're juggling multiple things- studying for finals, packing up your dorm, planning your travel home, and more- which can create more stress than usual. On top of that, you might be mentally preparing to come home to a family or home dynamic that you haven't lived in for a while. Stress happens, but it's crucial to preserve your mental health and well-being. Take some time to research free mental health resources to help you manage your stress and cope with being home. You can also check with your college's counseling/mental health center. They may offer remote services while you are home, or they can connect you to resources in your area.



Talk to your family about expectations and boundaries while visiting home

When you're visiting home for the first time, your family might expect you to quickly re-adapt to their norms, rules, and expectations- which can feel conflicting when you're used to the life and structure you made while in college. On the other hand, your family may expect you to take on more adult responsibilities (like buying your own food or doing your own laundry), which can be just as stressful if you wanted to come home and be taken care of. Either way, it can be a shock to your system, especially when you don't expect it.

It's important to talk to your family about expectations while visiting home. For example, will you have plans outside of family gatherings? Is there a curfew you need to follow? Depending on your family dynamic, it can be difficult and uncomfortable to ask these questions. The conversation will look different depending on a number of factors- your relationship to your family, your living situation, your culture, and more. Whether you're asking these questions ahead of time or addressing them in the moment, it's important to bring these things up to avoid building tension between you and your family.

Adjust expectations

Understanding that parents may treat you like the child they launched into the world not too long ago can make "being treated like a kid" a little less frustrating.

Incorporate mindfulness and self-care into your day

Being home for the holidays can pressure you into feeling booked and busy- going to holiday parties, get-togethers, and maybe even a doctor's appointment or two- all within a few days. With the chaos the holidays bring, it's okay to take a few moments to sit in any feelings of stress, annoyance, or anxiety. Incorporating mindfulness and self-care into your day- whether it's a few minutes of meditation, a calming activity, or journaling- can help you feel grounded, even when it feels like the world is spinning too fast around you.

Familiar and Forgotten Friendships

Coming home for the holidays usually means you'll see a lot of old friends. While it's always fun to catch up with people you're familiar with, it can also be a little jarring.

Your friends have been living their own lives while you were away, too. Maybe some of them went to different colleges. Others may have stayed in the same town. When you hear about what your friends have been doing, it can give you a big case of FOMO (fear of missing out).

This is even true when it comes to your family members. They've likely made plans for things that haven't included you because you've been away.

Keeping this fear of missing out in check is important. Remember, you've also been doing things that didn't involve your family and friends for months. If you start focusing on things you can't control, you'll only end up feeling sorry for yourself.

Keep in touch with your friends from college

After a few semesters in college, it's likely you have established your own community—you found new friends, colleagues, or chosen family. Staying in touch with them while you are home can help remind you of your life in college and get you excited about returning after the holidays. If your friends are also visiting their homes for the holidays, they're likely experiencing similar feelings of stress and excitement. You can plan a virtual party or hangout over Zoom, exchange funny memes over text, or even call them. No matter how you do it, staying connected with your friends can help you feel less alone during the holidays, even if you're far away from them.

Getting along with family members

When you return home from college, you might find your relationship with your parents is a bit strained at first. Again, this often has to do with boundaries. But, if you have siblings at home, it might even affect your self-esteem.

If those siblings are still getting attention, it's easy to think that your parents love them more or are glad you're gone. That isn't the case!

It's important to keep that in mind. In fact, it's a great idea to try to do things with your siblings. You might find at first that they are easier to get along with than your parents, until things start to get settled.

Coming home from college for the holidays isn't always easy. In fact, some freshmen choose not to go home because they've adapted so well in their new lives at school. But, finding that balance between your old life and your new one will help to prepare you for other types of uncertainties and changes in your future. Knowing what you should expect as you go home can help you prepare yourself. When you do that, you'll be able to handle the comparison between college and home a bit better. Don't be afraid to head home and make the best of the holiday season with the people you love (or at least live with!).

Mental Health Check

The holiday season can be very tough for many people and are often linked to symptoms of depression. The change in season along with the vacation days tend to contribute to what is called Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). This is a type of depression that is brought on by decreasing daylight with the shorter days of winter. Even without a diagnosis of SAD, individuals may still be impacted by a worsening of their ongoing depression or may experience the less severe "winter blues". The added free time, change in daily structure, increased family contact, and all the well-known stressors of the holidays can also worsen depression and anxiety.

While free time is welcomed by most, everyone does not cope as well with a lack of structure. Someone with depression may isolate, focus on lost loved ones, dwell in negative self-regulation, worry over finances or about acting happy around the holiday cheer. The holidays can also include negative family relations, excessive social obligations, an abundance of unhealthy food, sleep disruption, etc.

How can I be kind to myself during the holidays?

Be kind to yourself and counteract your triggers and vulnerabilities by incorporating some of these tips into your holiday management plan.

- **Plan your days:** After a day or two of sleeping in and resting, get back to a consistent schedule filled with a balance of what you need to do and what you want to do.
- **Practice restraint:** Go ahead and have some sweets, partake in the eggnog, go to that holiday party, but set a limit for yourself. Eat one cookie instead of two; limit your intake of food, drinks and how long you will stay at a social gathering.
- **Get sunshine:** Spend time in the daylight every day. Your body needs Vitamin D and the full spectrum light will help beat the "winter blues".
- **Move it:** Whether it is yoga, a walk, or some time at the gym, give your body the attention it needs. Get your heart pumping for 30 minutes and you will be rewarded with a mood enhancement, not unlike the effect of an anti-depressant medication, plus it reduces anxiety and improves sleep.
- **Set limits:** Pick and choose who, what, where and when. Reduce holiday obligations and go to events you find enjoyable or leave early from ones that are not. With planning, it is possible to make choices and say no.
- **Unplug the holidays:** Ever repeating seasonal music, holiday-themed commercials, and countless holiday TV shows or movies are always part of the season. Give your mind a break and unplug from the noise and focus on your mental health.
- **Do something different:** Volunteer at a soup kitchen, try a new activity, join a group of carolers. Anything that pulls you out of the same pattern or out of your head can make a difference in how you feel.
- **Spend time with contributors:** Whether it is staying on campus or returning home during the holidays, reach out and spend time with those who contribute to your life happiness and well-being.
- **Me time:** College can be tough and you may lose sight of what your body and mind need. For some, a fireplace and a good book can recharge them, for others, it may be a pedicure or watching a favorite television show. Think about gift can you give to yourself.
- **Face the loss:** During the holidays, we do a mental inventory of who is no longer with us. Include them in your holiday by fixing their best dish, sharing great stories about them or creating a tradition to honor them.
- **Be mindful:** Throughout the day return to the here and now. Pay attention to the present moment and how it feels without judgement.
- **Try pet therapy:** Who doesn't feel better after hanging out with a dog, cat or perhaps a horse? Look for opportunities to spend time with animals. Borrow a dog to go for a walk or run together. Visit a petting zoo.
- **Less is more:** Keep your expectations in balance, don't strive to do too much. Look for happiness in what you can do and keep your expectations realistic.
- **Look for the good:** Notice what is enjoyable and pleasant in your experiences. Remind yourself about the positives of the day and about yourself.