



ADAA Statement on Holiday Anxiety

Frank Schneier, MD

What is holiday anxiety?

Holidays are a time when families and friends often come together and celebrate. From parties to presents, these events are supposed to be something we anticipate with pleasure. For many people, however, the holidays and their festivities can be quite stressful, for a variety of reasons. Fortunately there are some effective ways to cope with holiday-related fears.

What is it about the holidays that can provoke anxiety?

Holiday parties can trigger social anxiety in many people, who may focus on such gatherings as a test of their social skills and self-worth (with potential for falling short and feeling embarrassment). Entering a crowded room, approaching familiar or new faces, and figuring out what to talk about can trigger fears of showing signs of anxiety and being judged. Hosting a party can raise pressures to make sure that everything is just right. Exchanging gifts sometimes causes anxiety, especially if finances are tight but sometimes just from concerns that a loved one won't like your gift. Aside from these social concerns, holiday travel can bring a range of stressors, from packing and putting aside work, to coping with traffic or fears of flying. Holidays can additionally be a challenging time of year for those who want to manage their weight, as treats may be abundant and irresistible. Finally, no family is perfect, and holidays can reignite old frustrations and hurts, leading to anxiety, anger, or sadness. And all of these factors can be compounded by not sleeping or exercising enough, or not eating well.

Holiday Time Coping Tips

- *Identify thoughts that are making you anxious*
- *Set reasonable expectations and small goals*
- *Focus on what will give you satisfaction*
- *Don't rely on avoidance or alcohol to cope*
- *Take care of yourself: Mind your sleep, eating, and exercise habits*

How can I keep my anxiety in check during the holidays?

If you're feeling anxious about upcoming holiday festivities, the first step is to recognize and accept it. It's not shameful or wrong, and awareness is the necessary first step to dealing with it. Try to pinpoint what you're most anxious about, and think about what has helped you get through such situations in the past. Often anxiety grows out of setting unrealistic expectations, which may either be too high (e.g. travel should be stress-free, I need to make a great impression on everyone, or my family should be perfect) or may be catastrophic (e.g. the plane will crash, and if I do get there I'll make a fool of myself). Try adjusting unrealistic expectations of yourself and others toward what's more likely, and see if that lowers anxiety. Setting a small but achievable goal for yourself ("I'll try to start at least two conversations at the holiday party") and focusing on what will be pleasurable about an event may take off some pressure and improve your experience.

If you're thinking of coping by avoiding a challenging situation or planning to numb yourself with alcohol, reconsider. Often the anticipatory anxiety is much worse than the actual experience, and by avoiding you

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will lose the opportunity to get more comfortable with the situation you fear. Excessive alcohol will interfere with your social functioning in the long run. So try to push yourself a bit to figure out some healthy ways to manage a challenging situation.

But also be sure to take care of yourself, despite the holiday frenzy. Plan ahead and make sure you have some down time. Let a travel companion know if you're uneasy, so you can shed the additional burden of having to conceal your anxiety. Relaxation exercises such as slow breathing, meditation, and mindfulness can calm your body and thoughts. Try to maintain healthy sleep, eating, and exercise habits.