A THERAPIST-INFORMED HOLIDAY GUIDE

Here's to Better Holidays.

A guide to the season you're actually living, not the one you're supposed to.

Check In • Reflect • Make a plan • Carry it forward



Rethink the season. Reclaim your peace.

There's the holiday everyone sees, and then there's the one you're living. Yours might hold joy alongside stress, grief, money worries, family tension, or the exhaustion of doing it all. This guide offers space to notice what you're carrying, decide what matters most, and plan a season that fits your real capacity. Use it on your own or in a session with your therapist.

A narrative-informed reflection workbook made for the 2026 holiday season by BetterHelp.
This resource is educational and reflective. It is not a replacement for mental health care.

BEGIN HERE

How do you want the holidays to feel?

There's often an unspoken expectation that the holidays should be magical, meaningful, and full of joy. When your real experience includes stress, sadness, or complicated relationships, it can feel like you're doing the holidays wrong. You're not.

TWO THINGS CAN BE TRUE

You can love your family and feel overwhelmed by them. You can enjoy a tradition and be relieved when it's over. Neither feeling is wrong.

LET GO OF PERFECT

Things don't have to be flawless to be meaningful. Focus on doing your best, rather than doing it all.

Reflect

Right now, the feelings I notice most about this season are:

The holiday I feel I'm "supposed" to have looks like:

The holiday I actually want would feel more:

☐ Restful	☐ Connected	☐ Meaningful	☐ Simple	☐ Joyful	☐ Other

Think of a holiday memory you still treasure. Was it perfect? What made it matter?

THERAPIST INSIGHT

"Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is let the holidays be imperfect and meet ourselves where we actually are."

Sarah Close, LPC

CHECK IN

Check in before you commit

Between gatherings, work parties, and traditions we feel we have to keep, the holidays can become a season of obligation. Often the hardest part is the guilt of wanting to do less. **Remember: an invitation is not an obligation.**

DO I REALLY WANT TO GO?

Not whether I should or whether someone expects me to.

DO I HAVE THE CAPACITY?

Room on my calendar doesn't mean room in my life.

WHAT AM I SAYING NO TO WHEN I SAY YES?

Maybe rest, family time, or an evening doing nothing.

DOES THIS MATTER TO ME, OR AM I AFRAID OF DISAPPOINTING SOMEONE?

Allow yourself to adjust your practices without guilt.

The Holiday Capacity Check-In

1. My current capacity: how much energy do I have for more commitments?

☐ 1 *(running on empty)*	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5 *(Plenty to give)*

2. My motivation: why am I considering this?

☐ I want to	☐ It's meaningful to me	☐ I feel obligated

3. My priorities: two or three experiences I genuinely want to make room for

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4. My boundary: one commitment I can decline, shorten, or approach differently

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THERAPIST INSIGHT

"You can love your family, value your friendships, and appreciate an invitation without attending every gathering."

Sonni Williams, LPC, PMH-C

REFLECT

Family, boundaries, and guilt

The holidays can pull us back into old family roles: keeping everyone happy, avoiding conflict, earning approval. You don't have to untangle years of family history over one dinner. Noticing the pattern and giving yourself permission to respond differently, is meaningful progress.

GUILT ISN'T ALWAYS A SIGN YOU'RE DOING SOMETHING WRONG.

Sometimes it's simply what you feel when you're doing something differently. Boundaries can help you stay connected to others without abandoning yourself.

Reflect

Around my family, the role I tend to step into is:

Traditions that feel meaningful vs. like obligations:

Is that role still serving me? What would I do differently?

Conversations or situations I'd prefer to avoid:



WORDS YOU CAN BORROW

"I'm excited to see everyone, but I'll only be able to stay for two hours."
"I'd prefer not to talk about _____ during dinner."
"I'm not comfortable having that conversation today. Let's talk about something else."

Share boundaries early and practice saying no with someone you trust.

When things get intense

Have an exit strategy
It's okay to leave, no apology needed.

Expect some pushback
Boundaries are self-care, not selfishness.

Redefine success
The goal may simply be to feel heard.

Focus on what you can control
You can manage your own response.

Use "I" statements
Name what you feel and what you need.

Recharge afterward
Hard conversations are draining. Rest.

REFLECT

Grief, loneliness, and winter mood

"The holidays just aren't the same anymore. Everyone seems happy, but I'm struggling."

The season can widen the distance between the life you're living and the life you imagined, whether you're missing someone, navigating a breakup, experiencing loneliness, or feeling disconnected from family. You're allowed to grieve people and also the traditions and relationships you wish you had. It's natural to feel grief and joy at the same time.

Reflect

What am I longing for this season?

- [ ] Connection
- [ ] Rest
- [ ] Space to feel sad
- [ ] I feel obligated

Is there a small way I can honor that need?

A ritual I'd like to continue, adapt, or create for someone who can't be here:

One way I can connect rather than isolate (reaching out, giving back):

WHEN THE SEASON ITSELF FEELS HEAVY

Shorter days, colder weather, and less time outside can leave you feeling sluggish, low, and withdrawn, often starting around when the clocks change in November. Because it overlaps with the holidays, it's easy to assume you're just stressed. Notice whether this shift happens around the same time each year.

- [ ] Get outside in morning daylight
- [ ] Keep regular sleep and wake times
- [ ] Move your body
- [ ] Plan a few things you enjoy

If low mood, oversleeping, or loss of interest lasts most days for two weeks or more, talk with a therapist or doctor. Seasonal depression is common and support is available.

REFLECT & PLAN

Money, gifts, and social pressure

Separate the money from the meaning

Gifts, travel, hosting, and events add up. Many people quietly overspend because spending feels tied to love or keeping the peace, then carry that stress or debt into the new year.

What am I hoping this gift or event says about me or my relationships?

MY TOTAL HOLIDAY BUDGET

Gifts	$
Food & Hosting	$
Travel	$
Events	$
Total	**$**

Often the answer is care, and there are many ways to show it. Ideas to suggest:

- [ ] A gift exchange
- [ ] A spending cap
- [ ] A shared experience

Most people are relieved when someone else says it first.

Make a plan for drinking

Parties and family dinners often revolve around alcohol. If you're cutting back, sober, or in recovery, you may feel you have to explain yourself. Or you may notice you're drinking more just to get through stressful gatherings.

Consider: what is drinking doing for you at this event? Is it facilitating connection, easing anxiety, helping you get through a tense conversation?

Decide before you arrive
Know your plan for the event ahead of time.

You don't owe an explanation
Your choice is enough on its own.

Keep a drink you enjoy in hand
Have a short answer ready: "I'm good, thanks."

In recovery?
Add extra support and give yourself permission to leave early.



CARRY FORWARD

My Better Holiday Plan.

Self-care may look different this time of year, and that's okay. Small, steady efforts, like a 10-minute meditation or a walk with family before dinner, still count. Treat them like any other commitment.

Reflect

My non-negotiables this season:

Downtime I'm blocking on my calendar:

A task I can delegate or ask for help with:

A person or reminder that can support me:

MY PERMISSION STATEMENT

This holiday season, I'm allowing myself to...

What am I longing for this season?

☐ I paused before saying yes	☐ I chose what felt right over what looked right
☐ I rested without earning it first	☐ I asked for support

★ **PASS IT ON** ★

Know someone who could use some support this holiday season? Send them this guide or just tell them it's what got you thinking.

Resources

Boundaries & family
Therapist Aid: Setting Boundaries; Assertive Communication · NAMI: Setting Boundaries Guide

Grief & loneliness
Therapist Aid: Grief Fact Sheet; Tasks of Mourning · NAMI: The Most Difficult Time of the Year

Stress & overwhelm
Therapist Aid: Stress Management · NAMI: Managing Your Mental Health During the Holidays

Money & budgeting
CFPB budgeting tools · consumerfinance.gov/consumer-tools/budgeting

Seasonal mood & alcohol
NIMH: Seasonal Affective Disorder fact sheet · NIAAA: Rethinking Drinking · SAMHSA Helpline 1-800-662-4357

In crisis? (US)
Call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Reflection can bring up strong emotions. You may find it helpful to pause, return later, or talk about what came up with a licensed mental health professional.