



THE
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podcast**

WITH THERAPIST
Amy Morin

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221 — Friday Fix: 10 Ways to Stay Mentally Strong During the Holidays

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*! I'm Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You're listening to The Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Don't forget to subscribe to us on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let's dive into today's episode!

Today, I'm talking about how to stay mentally strong during the holidays.

A study by NAMI — the National Alliance on Mental Illness — found that 64% of people with a mental illness say their symptoms get worse around the holidays. That study was from 2014 though. I think in a post-COVID world, that number may be even higher.

Other studies show our stress levels go up this time of year—and most of you don't need a study to tell you that. You feel it firsthand and see it in other people.

The therapy office always got extra busy this time of year. New clients would call looking to schedule appointments, former clients often asked to return, and many of our existing clients said they were feeling worse during the holidays.

I know I've had times when the holidays felt awful. After losing my mom and my husband I wasn't sure how to celebrate or whom to spend the holidays with. It was really rough. And holidays have definitely never felt the same as they once did.

I decided to learn more about what all of you were struggling with this year. So on Instagram, I asked what made the holidays tough and you all certainly answered. I was flooded with answers, but I noticed that they all seemed to fall into the same categories. Here's what you said made this time of year most difficult:

Productivity - Some people said as the year winds down, it's hard to focus on work and this is the time of year when there are a lot of year-end deadlines and things that need to be finished up.

Grief - Tons of you mentioned grief. When you've lost someone, the holidays often amplify that loss and it's tough to get through. Plenty of people will tell me that they dread the holidays for years—or maybe forever—after losing someone.

Having to be around people - Some of you were stressed about having to be around a lot of people at parties, while shopping, and while going to holiday events. I'm hearing a lot of people say they aren't used to having so much time around people since they spent so much time at home during the pandemic. One person said they want to be alone for the holidays, but no one will let them because they think it's sad for them to be alone.

Loneliness - A huge number of you said you struggle with loneliness this time of year. One person said they hate not being invited to parties and seeing people have fun on Instagram. Someone else said they feel lonely when they're around their family at holiday parties because they don't feel close to anyone.

Family conflict - Families are often divided on certain issues or there may be old unhealed wounds, or you might have a sibling who is mad because you cut someone else in the family out of your life. Sometimes there's a lot of tension and sometimes people feel like they need to pick sides when there's a rift.

Money - While some of you said you are disturbed by the consumerism you see this time of year, others of you want to buy more but can't afford it. There's often pressure to buy gifts for people and decorations and attend events—which can put a serious strain on your budget especially when we're seeing prices as high as they are right now.

Stress over finding gifts - Many of you said you think you're bad at finding the right gift for people and it takes you forever to shop for them.

Not having family or the ideal family - Some of you said you don't associate with your family or certain family members. Others of you said you have a dysfunctional family or some unique dynamics that make the holidays a lot more complicated than the Hallmark version of the holidays.

Ruined holidays from the past - Several people who responded said holidays are associated with bad memories. Some said they grew up in homes where there was substance abuse and domestic violence, and those issues are often amplified around the holidays. Other people said holidays are some of the worst times in their lives so they just dread them each year.

Having too much to do - Many of you said you're just overwhelmed by having too much to do. Some of you said you have to work more hours during the holiday season which means you have a lot less time to manage your day-to-day lives and throw in all the holiday stuff you want to do and there just aren't enough hours in the day to do them.

Thank you so much to everyone who shared your struggles with me. I appreciate hearing what's going on with you. And your answers are proof that there are a wide variety of things that can make the holidays tough.

So no matter what you're going through this holiday season, there are things you can do to manage your mental health. Remember, there are two ways to tackle the issue. You can tackle the problem (which might mean spending less money, attending fewer events, or setting boundaries with people) and tackle how you feel about the problem (like managing your unhelpful thoughts and reaching for healthy coping skills—like reading a book or getting exercise). It's often most helpful to tackle the holidays with both approaches. So here are 10 things you can do to stay mentally strong this holiday season:

- 1. Know that you're not alone.** Although most people only talk about the happier side of the holidays, know that you aren't alone if you don't feel happy this time of year. In reality, the vast majority of people struggle during the holiday season. Just knowing that you aren't weird for having a hard time or that you aren't the only one going through something might give you some peace of mind.
- 2. Establish your goal for the holiday season.** Spend a few minutes thinking about what you really want your holidays to be like. What's most important to you? Over Thanksgiving, a family member missed out on spending time with family because she spent three days baking in the kitchen. There were a lot of out-of-town guests that she rarely sees but rather than spend time together, she insisted she had to cook. She later regretted that she missed the mark—she wished she had spent time with people rather than trying to prepare the perfect meal. So think about what your goals are — if it's to spend time with people, then focus more on giving people your undivided attention rather than worrying so much about the decorations or the gifts. Decide how you want to spend the holidays this year—this can be especially important if you've lost a loved one. Things might look a little different this year and it's up to you how you want to

celebrate (or if you want to skip the holidays altogether).

- 3. Take care of your body.** If you aren't taking care of your body your mind will suffer. Not getting enough sleep, eating too much junk food, and drinking too much will interfere with your ability to manage your emotions. Take care of your body if you want to take care of your mind.

- 4. Put healthy things into your mind.** We talk a lot about what we eat during the holidays. But it's also important to pay attention to your digital consumption. Staring at social media stories where everyone else seems to be loving holiday parties might wreak havoc on your mental health. And I'll let you in on a little secret — if someone is creating social media posts repeatedly while they are at a holiday event, they probably aren't actually having all that much fun. They're not enjoying themselves enough to put their phone down. So keep that in mind even when they insist they're having the time of their lives. But it's not just social media we should monitor. Pay attention to what you're watching and listening to as well. While Christmas movies might be helpful or holiday music might be good for one person, it's not good for everyone. So decide what's healthy for you.

- 5. Establish boundaries.** Say no to things you don't want to do. Seriously, it's OK to skip an event. Or, say you're going to take your own vehicle to an event so you can leave whenever you want if you know that riding with someone else will mean you get stuck there long past the time you want to go home. Say no when you're asked to volunteer for extra things you don't have time for too. It's OK.

- 6. Create a realistic to-do list.** If you put a lot of pressure on yourself to do too much stuff, create a realistic to-do list. Remember, the sun will still rise tomorrow if you don't decorate your house or if you just buy people gift cards instead of shopping endlessly for the perfect presents. Make a to-do list for yourself that is realistic and be willing to cut out the stuff that isn't high on the priority list.

- 7. Create a “not-to-do” list.** As the author of books like *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, I clearly like “not-to-do” lists. And the holidays are a great time to create your own not-to-do list. What do you want to avoid this holiday season — maybe losing your temper with your kids or maybe pressuring yourself to host holiday gatherings? Figure out what you want to avoid this year and focus on not doing those things.
- 8. Reframe your unhelpful thoughts.** When you catch yourself thinking you need to find the perfect gift for someone, ask yourself how many gifts you actually remember receiving in your life. Like five years ago, what did this person buy you? You probably have no idea. And guess what? That person isn't going to remember what you bought them for a gift either. Remembering that can help you put things in perspective. Any time you pressure yourself to ensure your house looks great or that you baked something perfect for a party, remind yourself those things really don't matter as much as you think they do at the moment.
- 9. Ask for help.** Give yourself permission to ask for help if you need it. That could mean asking someone to help you decorate the house. Or it might mean confiding in a friend that you're feeling lonely. It could also mean starting therapy or asking for help paying for presents for your kids. But so many people are afraid of bothering someone this time of year that they don't want to ask. But if you don't ask, no one will know what you need.
- 10. Celebrate your way... or don't celebrate at all.** It's up to you. And while you might feel pressure to do certain things, you don't have to. It's OK to break the mold, ditch some traditions, and give yourself permission to create a holiday that looks whatever way you want it to look.

So those are 10 things you can do to stay mentally strong this holiday season. Just remember, being mentally strong doesn't mean pretending you don't care about anything. Instead, it might involve choosing where to put your energy wisely, and it might be about allowing yourself to experience some uncomfortable emotions at times. It's OK to be sad during the holidays. And if you're struggling, it's OK to ask for help.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing some strategies for getting through the holidays, share this show with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called "10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential." To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who has 13 GRAMMY plaques and has been nominated for 2 more), Nick Valentin.