

Views from VanDeWalle

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Reconnecting During the Holidays

The holidays are usually a time filled with joy as many reunite with family members not seen as often. You might share special family recipes, play games, watch movies and just “catch up”. Whether you connect in-person or virtually, it is important to have social connection. Connecting with family and friends is important and improves physical health and mental and emotional well-being (Seppala, 2014).

According to an article published on Nebraska Extension’s ruralwellness.unl.edu website, “Research consistently tells us that taking care of others and maintaining meaningful relationships across generations are important for resilience and wellbeing.” (Bulling et al. 2020) Meaningful relationships contribute to a sense of belonging and help us feel connected. Sharing family stories and traditions among multiple generations is also a very special bond.

The holiday season can trigger stress and sometimes even depression. Think about all the demands we add to our plates – shopping, baking, cooking meals, cleaning, and hosting events, just to name a few. With all the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, make sure to create time for meaningful connection with friends and family. Dr. Emma Seppala, the science director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University, points out that people who feel more connected to others have lower levels of anxiety and depression. Studies also show connected people have higher self-esteem, greater empathy for others, are more trusting and cooperative and, therefore, others are more open to trusting and cooperating with them.

Here are some fun ways to not only physically connect, but emotionally connect to loved ones this holiday season.

- Play games with each other. This can be low-tech with board games and cards or if you are not able to physically be together, search online games to play with family members. Google, “free online games” and many options will appear, even the AARP has free games, including Atari! Just be aware that if you download an app, there might be add-ons that cost money and it might take some time to explore what will work for you and your family. You can even play card games online at <https://playingcards.io/>.
- Arts and crafts are a creative and fun way to spend time with family, especially kids. It’s a way to help each other, learn about each other’s talents and create memories.
- For a holiday meal, have your child host “opening” and “closing” ceremonies. This could include a prayer, song, dance or even jokes.
- Cooking together is a fun family activity and can even take some of the stress off the host. After the meal, share the chores so everyone can relax and participate in other activities.
- Send care packages to family members to enjoy or for a special event if you connect virtually. For example, send a hot cocoa packet and small marshmallows and enjoy hot chocolate while virtually watching a movie together.



- Bake cookies together. Not able to do this in person? Have a virtual cookie decorating or meal preparation party. Pick out a recipe and make it together virtually. Deliver food to a friend or family members' porch or mail items such as cookies to those who might need a little extra cheering up.
- Participate in a gratitude activity, like writing down things you are grateful for and sharing with your friends and family. Try a gratitude jar or bowl where everyone writes down something, they are grateful for on a slip of paper. For a virtual holiday meal, take turns reading aloud what is in the jar or bowl.
- Thank people! Decorate your front yard with thank-you signs for essential works, healthcare heroes, teachers and other special people. Have your child paint rocks with kindness messages and set rocks in special places to brighten someone else's day.

However, you spend your holiday season, remember that having social connection has many benefits. Do what matters to you and find ways to allocate more time towards those activities. If you have kids, let them brainstorm for holiday plans and start new traditions. Help children cope with the holiday blues and validate potential feelings of disappointment and sadness to their disrupted holiday traditions. Remember that helping children overcome disappointment helps them build resiliency. Teach fun relaxation strategies such as meditation or even trying out a new candle scent or lotion.

Regardless how you celebrate your holiday season, remember that you are not alone. It's okay to ask for help if things get too overwhelming.

Reaching Out is Nebraska Strong

Reaching out to others and asking for help may look a bit different now but staying emotionally and socially connected is important to our health and wellbeing at all times. Learning to recognize your stressors and how to manage stress can help you personally and those around you. If you recognize someone in distress, use a caring approach in listening to them, and then connect them to resources.

Keep these Hotlines in your phone contacts:

- Rural Response Hotline: 1-800-464-0258
- Nebraska Family Helpline: 1-888-866-8660

Resources:

- The Rural Family Stress and Wellness website: ruralwellness.unl.edu