

Views from VanDeWalle

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Stayed Connected During the Holidays – COVID Style

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”. COVID-19 has certainly made this very difficult for face-to-face interaction but that doesn’t mean you can’t find other ways to connect. We have to be more creative and purposeful in how to interact.

According to an article published earlier this year by UNL faculty and 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.

With the current pandemic, maintaining distance from our loved ones is difficult. We have missed birthdays, special events and probably other annual events or outings. The holiday season often triggers stress and sometimes even depression. Think about all of the demands we add to our plates – shopping, baking, cooking meals, cleaning and hosting events, just to name a few. This year, however, you are probably feeling a different type of stress – lack of normalcy, anxiety and disconnect. While COVID-19 has added new challenges, it has sparked creativity for some people. Like many of you, I’ve been trying to find new ways to stay emotionally connected to loved ones, so I searched and brainstormed some options.

- Host a virtual Holiday meal with friends and family who don’t live with you. You can schedule time to have a virtual meal, say a family blessing together and converse in conversation. You could also have people share recipes and prepare the same special family traditional recipes. Have everyone put their devices on the table so you can talk while enjoying the meal.
- If you plan to have a meal together, drop off or send an item to that person ahead of time so you can share that item. You can even send matching centerpieces for everyone to display on their table. Even though it might not be the traditional meal, consider using a meal delivery site like “Hello Fresh”, etc. to share the same food.
- Search online games to play with family members who are in a different location than you. 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/>.
- Send care packages to family members to enjoy or for a special event when you connect virtually. For example, send a hot cocoa packet and small marshmallows and enjoy hot chocolate while virtually watching a movie together.



- 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. During a virtual holiday meal, take turns reading aloud what is in the jar or bowl.
- For a holiday meal, have your child host "opening" and "closing" ceremonies. This could include a prayer, song, dance or even jokes.
- Thank people! Decorate your front yard with thank-you signs for essential workers, 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.

This might be a year to reflect on the things that really matter to you and find ways to allocate more time towards those activities. If you have kids, let them brainstorm for alternative plans and start new traditions. Help children cope with the holiday blues and validate their 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. We are all navigating through these uncertain times together and 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
- National Disaster Distress Hotline: 1-800-985-5990

Resources:

- The Rural Family Stress and Wellness website: ruralwellness.unl.edu
- Nebraska Extension's COVID-19 Resource Page: disaster.unl.edu/coronavirus-covid-19-resources
- Generations United COVID-19 Resources: gu.org/covid-19
- AARP Article: [AARP Article: How to Fight the Social Isolation of Coronavirus](#)