



Holidays DON'T have to be a stressful time

The winter holidays can be stressful for anyone, but when your loved one is about to deploy, is currently deployed, or home and in the process readjusting to family life, they can be especially difficult. You may experience a range of emotions, from concern to loneliness -- even anger and disappointment. The holidays may magnify those feelings, but they can also be a time to strengthen your emotional commitment to your service member and your family.

The most important tip to remember is this: Keep your perspective on what is most important! It is spending time with loved ones or keeping them with us from a distance. Don't get caught up in the "busyness" of the holiday and lose sight of what really matters!

Know your limits

Set priorities. List what you want to do but then decide what activities are the most important and meaningful to you.

It's ok to eliminate some things and accomplish those holiday activities that mean the most to you and your family.

Learn to say no

Know yourself

Remind yourself of what helps you during difficult times. Some people prefer to be with others and need a lot of company; whereas some people can get overwhelmed easily by being very busy. Know yourself and learn to recognize your personal symptoms of distress. Honor your own sense of who you are and what you need to stay balanced. Don't let others make you feel guilty about not meeting THEIR expectations of what you should be doing.

Plan ahead for the holidays

If possible, sit down with your service member before your separation to talk about how you will mark the holidays once you are apart. If you are already apart, discuss your plans through letters, e-mail, or telephone calls.

Get an early start with gifts and cards. Remember it can take a week or more for a package to arrive from the U.S. Give yourself plenty of time to make or purchase and send your gift so your service member will receive it in time for the holiday.

If possible, you can arrange with your service member to celebrate at the same time even though you may be thousands of miles apart. For example, can you arrange to open presents at the same time, or to go to a religious service at the same time?

Simplify gift giving

Set a limit for spending on gifts and STICK TO IT.

Set a limit for shopping and say that you will be done at least 3 days before Christmas to give yourself time to decompress.

Have children make gifts to save money - homemade gifts are often more meaningful.

Give "coupons" to friends/family for services they can redeem as your gift to them (ex: 2 hours of babysitting, wash the car, etc.)

If you are a family in need, don't be afraid to ask for help. Help is available. Family members can agree to just buy for the younger children in the family.

Each family member writes his or her name and 3 gift ideas for under \$20 on a piece of paper and puts it into a bowl. Each family member then picks from the bowl and buys one of the gifts for that one other person.

Be aware of your expectations

Many people become overwhelmed because they feel they have to live up to a certain expectation about what has to happen over the holidays. They put unnecessary pressure on themselves to have everything perfect.

Be open to accepting that this holiday season could be different. This may be true if your service member is getting ready to deploy or has recently returned home and this is their first holiday home. Ask for input about how he or she prefers to celebrate.

Follow as many holiday traditions as is realistically possible. Ex: special dinner, attending a religious service, etc. We all find comfort in familiar rituals and ceremonies.

Start a new tradition to mark a new beginning for the family if someone has recently returned.

Be prepared for a post-holiday let down. Getting through the holidays may not be as difficult as you thought; it may even have served as a distraction from your service member's deployment cycle. Once it's over and things go back to "normal", you may find it difficult to get on with the day-to-day challenges of military family life. Prepare yourself for this possibility by keeping your support systems in place in January and beyond.

Phone calls: If your service member is deployed, calls home may be unpredictable, so be prepared if the service member is not able to call on the holiday itself. You might want to aim for a call during the week of the holiday instead. If you have a cell phone, arrange for the deployed service member to call that number so you won't miss the phone call if you're away from home. Please be sure to have your cell phone with you (and turned on) at all times.

Keep a healthy balance

You don't have to do everything. It's more important to take time out to enjoy the season.

Have fun. Drive or walk with your family or friends to see the holiday decorations. Give yourself time for activities that make you feel good. Go swimming, sledding, ice skating, or skiing. Go on a nature walk or start a new project.

Stay rested and healthy. Remember to take care of yourself and keep your energy level high by eating well, staying active, and getting enough sleep. Often, we over extend ourselves by staying up too late, over-eating, and going off our exercise routines. Remember the importance of healthy eating and exercise.

MORE IDEAS THAT COULD BE HELPFUL

If you need to be with people:

- *Plan to attend holiday events for families of deployed service members.* You can find out about these by checking with your family support centers.
- *If you have school-age children, attend holiday school events.* Volunteer to help your children's teachers. Even if you aren't able to attend the event, you can bake or help make decorations.
- *Help organize a holiday party or potluck for families in your loved one's command.* This will help keep your mind off your loneliness and you will be comforted to be with others who are going through the same thing.
- *Visit friends or family on the holiday.* If you live far away and funds are tight, ask those who would normally give you a gift to chip in for an airline ticket instead. If you prefer to stay home, invite family or friends to spend the holiday with you.
- *Volunteer for a good cause.* Collect coats for the needy; help stock shelves at the food pantry; serve a meal at a homeless shelter. Helping others less fortunate than you will keep you busy and will remind you of all you have. Ask your family support center staff about volunteer
- *Record a holiday message.* Borrow a video camera or tape recorder if you don't have one, and record yourself and other family members wishing the service member a happy holiday season. Do this far enough in advance so your loved one receives it in time for the holiday. Be sure to include a "Do not open until . . ." note on the package instructing your service member to wait until the day of the holiday to view or listen to the recording.
- *Keep holiday decorations up until your loved one returns, if it makes you feel better.* Or take them down and put them back up when your loved one returns. Some families celebrate the holidays twice: once on the actual dates, and again when their deployed service member returns home. However, be aware that leaving decorations up long after the holiday has passed may be an unpleasant reminder of your separation and may make it more difficult accept your situation.
- *Have a cookie exchange.*
- *Don't underestimate the power of shopping on-line!*
- *Wait until January to have a holiday party*
- *Gift cards really are ok.*