

Coping with Family Estrangement During the Holidays

What to Know

The holiday season is filled with family-centered activities and traditions, and you might believe that everyone is happily celebrating with loved ones. The truth is many families experience conflict, tension, or even estrangement where all communication is cut off.

Perhaps you feel isolated and alone if spending time with family is not an option for you. You might experience a mix of emotions that includes sadness, jealousy, anger, anxiety, shame, or worthlessness. If you are estranged from your family, here are some tips to make it through this emotionally challenging time of year.

1. Accept your feelings. For example, if you are sad – acknowledge you are sad, allow yourself to feel sad, and be present with the sadness. This process of acknowledging, allowing, and being present with your feelings builds resiliency and increases self-trust. This is especially helpful if your feelings were dismissed by family in the past. Ignoring your feelings or harshly judging yourself for having them can strengthen and prolong your discomfort.

2. Identify at least one coping mechanism. Perhaps you can write (but not send) a letter to your estranged loved one(s), engage in mindful meditation, or exercise. You might journal, focus on things for which you are grateful, practice yoga, or watch a funny movie. Determine one (or more) activities that will help – *before* you need them. So, when you are triggered, you do not have to find a healthy way to cope. Instead, you can channel your energy into doing whatever you need to feel better.

3. Determine how you will spend the holidays. It might be overwhelming to think about how you will spend holidays. But it is important that you come up with a plan for those significant days. Maybe you will schedule FaceTime with a friend or participate in a holiday 5k race. Whatever you decide to do, put each activity in your calendar. This will prevent you from having nothing to do and engaging in unhealthy or destructive habits.

4. Avoid social media. Even if it is temporary, it might be helpful to be tech-free if social media contributes to difficult feelings during the holidays. Be aware of your triggers – if reading negative news on Twitter makes you feel awful or seeing happy family photos on Facebook is upsetting – consciously avoid the social apps.

5. Make a list of your positive attributes. Remind yourself of everything great about you – particularly if you blame yourself for family estrangement or difficult relationships. It is important to remember why you are worthy of love and respect. Write down your list or put it on your phone so you can read it whenever you need to remind yourself.

6. Avoid isolating yourself. When you feel alone, it might feel easier to pull away from others. However, it is important that you avoid isolating yourself even more. Find ways to engage with people who provide you with a sense of security and connection. Talk about your family situation with people you trust.

7. Check in with a counselor or coach. Review your plan with them before the holiday season and fill them in on how it went after.

8. Remember the season is temporary. “Holiday culture” might feel overwhelming, but it only lasts a few weeks out of the year.

9. Serve others. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or clean out your closet and donate clothes to a local shelter. Foster a homeless cat or dog or host a holiday dinner for others who are also alone. When you serve others, you feel good about yourself.

Only you can decide what is the best way to support yourself during the holiday season when you are estranged from family. This worksheet will help you cope.

What to Do

If you are estranged from your family, describe what happened. Be as honest as you can.

Mentally prepare for the holidays by identifying potential triggers that may cause stress, sadness, anxiety, or discomfort during this time of year. Write them down.

Referring to the above tips, write down some ways you can cope. For example, think about how you will spend the holidays, or plan to delete social media apps for a specific period of time.

Did this activity help you successfully cope? _____

Why or why not? _____

What else can you do to cope?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
