

# COVID holidays inspire united behaviors, expectations for life in 2021

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For many Pennsylvanians, the late fall and early winter holiday seasons hold memories of coming together with friends and loved ones; a time of happiness and unity. Unity can be defined as many things: the state of being brought together, the quality of not being divided, a condition of harmony. In 2020, as a direct effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and related mandates, the physical aspect of unity has changed. Interestingly, unity is the word used by Pennsylvania Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine as she calls on citizens to do their respective parts in taming the resurgence of the virus. “Clearly we’re in the middle of our fall increase, but we are not at the peak,” said Levine. “The increases that we are seeing now are directly in response to, and a part of, those that are being experienced across the country. And our response needs to be one of unity.”

Levine notes the important role that Pennsylvanians will play in the mitigation of the virus during the 2020 holiday season and stresses the suggestion from the Department of Health to limit in-person gatherings to include only individuals regularly inside the home. “For other family members outside of the immediate household, the visits should be kept to a remote method and try to limit as much direct contact as possible,” said Levine. “The smaller gatherings have been strongly linked to the community spread of the virus.”

With safety in mind, the holidays take on a new sense of unity, with a key piece missing for many this year. “People are craving that connection; there is a lack of touch. And that is something that we absolutely need as human beings,” said Dr. Dea Silbertrust, president of the Pennsylvania Psychological Association. Silbertrust stressed the value of addressing the proverbial elephant in the room as an individual and as a family. “These holidays will be like no other,” said Silbertrust. “There is no hiding it, this year is different, and that difference will accentuate whatever has been tricky or difficult for us in the past.” To prevent further strain, Silbertrust recommends that people be honest with themselves and others this holiday season, especially as it relates to the plans and expectations for holiday gatherings. She says that the handling of activities, spacing, meals and masks should all be discussed in advance and with complete transparency. Silbertrust suggests Pennsylvanians explore self-help resources to help deal with the stress of the holidays, and shared that the Pennsylvania Psychological Association has many available on its public education page: <https://www.papsy.org/page/Publicfaq>.

Dr. Elana Newman, professor of psychology at the University of Tulsa, echoed Silbertrust’s sentiments regarding the need for a unification of the expectations Pennsylvanians have for themselves and the people in their lives this holiday season. “Everyone needs to accept that we’re not at 100% - and that is ok,” said Newman. “Our expectations of ourselves need to be gentle and mindful.” Newman says the preparation for the holidays can be as useful, if not more so, than the follow through. She encourages individuals to create digital and regular activity journals, much like “diet diaries” that people use when trying to create a healthier eating plan. Newman says these journals can help account for time spent working, online on phones or other devices, and practicing healthy, restful habits. “When you are rested, when you are focused – you can really get a lot done,” she said. “Recovery is essential.” She

suggests being mindful of the boundaries between different aspects of life and creating rituals to make those boundaries more tangible. “Symbolically cover up your computer at the end of the workday,” said Newman. “Or light a candle to signify the beginning of one activity or the end of another through your senses (of smell and sight).”

Newman explains that people should also consider the weather as they are preparing for the holidays and the coming season in potential “lockdown.” She says that as winter comes, individuals should be even more aware of the physical and mental need to get time outdoors each day. “Ask yourself, ‘How am I going to manage during the winter months? Do I need to order long underwear? What are the best times of day to get out? And how am I going to get my kids out of the house?’” said Newman. Regarding the holidays, she encourages people to totally disconnect from work and hide their phones and other devices from themselves. “Whatever aspects of the holidays are important to you – spirituality, family, community – immerse yourself in it,” she said. “It’s not easy to disconnect, it takes work and practice – some of us need more practice than others.”

As Pennsylvanians prepare for a time of disconnecting from the stressful distractions from external forces, some are facing stress related to their nuclear household unit. Some parents are finding themselves overwhelmed by personal and professional issues, while others are concerned about their children’s and teens’ education and social development during the pandemic. Dr. Levine provides a helpful metaphor as it relates to the virus. “Find the eye of the hurricane,” she said. “The hurricane’s forces are strong and dangerous, so it is important to find ways to create the safe, centered area – the eye of the hurricane – for yourself and your family.” In addition to serving as the secretary of health for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Dr. Levine is also the professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at the Penn State College of Medicine and has a background in pediatrics and adolescent medicine. She says that the time of the pandemic continues to be one of stress for children and teens in Pennsylvania, and it is crucial for parents and caregivers to provide guidance through healthy communication, one-on-one and family activities and oversight of school and social connections. “Check in on your kids’ and teens’ schoolwork and social lives,” said Levine. “And watch for signs of stress and depression.” The role of the parent or guardian is great as it relates to a child or teen’s resilience, she says. “It is important to stay calm. If parents are overly stressed, their kids are going to see that. [Parents] need to stay calm and provide stability for their children and teens.”

Beyond the household unit, many people find reuniting with friends and family creates or exacerbates anxiety. Sue Scheff, author of *Shame Nation*, offers a mantra for the 2020 holiday season. “Compassion over conflict,” she said. “We are finally at the end of a very stressful year. This is the time to have compassion for others rather than shaming them because they may have a difference of opinion or [in our opinion] may not be being socially responsible.” Scheff goes on to stress the value of perspective this holiday season, and she points out that many people have recently lost their jobs, are struggling with remote work while caring for young children or are potentially facing eviction or forbearance – all during a heated political time locally and across the nation. “Adults need to be mindful in understanding that the holidays are not a place for arguing,” said Scheff. “Conversations are about exchanging ideas, thoughts and opinions – and can be extremely interesting, but the moment they get heated and tempers flare, no one is listening anymore, and no one wins.” Scheff says that using listening skills and identifying when it is time to agree to disagree is one of the most important exercises to promote a calm and enjoyable experience together this year.

The spirit of community and service to the community is a holiday tradition for many Pennsylvanians. Volunteering fulfills the promise of unity within families, social circles and larger communities across the commonwealth. “You’re doing good for others while you’re doing good for yourself,” said Samantha Jo Warfield, spokesperson for AmeriCorps. “You don’t have to choose one or the other.” Warfield shared that Pennsylvanians involved in volunteering tallied 3.5 million in 2018, contributing 341 million hours of services, worth \$8.2 billion, to the project communities. She suggests individuals and families consider volunteering in the 2020 holiday season, whether by reaching out to a local organization or through ideas of their own. Warfield says checking in on elderly or disabled members of the neighborhood or community, picking up trash along the streets or in local parks and sending cards or letters to residents in assisted-living communities in the area are all great, safe options for service. She says these activities can bring unity in families during the winter season and into the new year. “Maybe your family used to have a football game before the Thanksgiving meal, but now they’re spread across the state. Make volunteering your pre-meal ‘event’ this year,” says Warfield. “Then, when you’re done you can come back and share pictures and stories as you connect for a virtual Thanksgiving meal together.”

The COVID-19 pandemic and other hardships in 2020 have wreaked havoc on plans and expectations for much of the year, leaving many Pennsylvanians feeling aimless and searching for sense and purpose in their lives: their homes, families, workplaces and communities; and destroying any semblance of togetherness and unity they once knew. Pioneer endocrinologist Hans Seyle once said, “It’s not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it.” The holiday season offers an opportunity for people across the commonwealth to regain or strengthen themselves and their relations and experiences with friends and loved ones, and to set the tone for the new year. “I am confident that we will get through this – as a nation, as a commonwealth,” said Dr. Levine. “But we need to stand together.”

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