

Coping with College Series

Surviving the Holidays

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For many students, going home for the holidays will be a challenge this year, whether you've been looking forward to it or not. You may notice some changes in yourself and how you feel about being home, as well as changes in your family and friends. There is a saying, "You can't go home again." In some ways this is true. You aren't the same person you were when you left home for Illinois State several months ago. You are different, and your home, family, and friends are different after adjusting to your absence. Some students' experience of going home will be more positive while for others it will be more difficult. Regardless of whether the change is perceived as positive or negative, whenever change happens, stress happens.

Preparing to deal with the stress of the holidays is important, and there are a few strategies you can use to cope with stress. The first strategy is to anticipate difficulties that may come up for you. For example, one difficulty might be that you have expectations that are too high for yourself, others, and the holidays in general. You may expect that this will be the year that your family will get along better, that you'll find the perfect gifts, or that you'll have plenty of time to be with old friends. Setting realistic expectations before the holiday begins might prevent you from letdown and disappointment, and will give you a greater chance of being satisfied with your experience.

Another strategy to help you prepare for the holidays is to identify what you can and can't control when you return home. Practice letting go of what you can't control, namely other peoples' behavior, their reactions to you, or requests of you. You can control your own behavior, thoughts, and reactions. You can learn to do this by first becoming more aware of yourself and what you need. Plan on setting aside time to take care of yourself and rejuvenate yourself, even if it is just a few minutes alone to catch your breath and relax. Exercise and rest will also help you take care of yourself; our bodies and minds have a way of telling us what we need when we pay attention.

When difficulty or conflicts with others do arise, you'll be better prepared to deal with them if you're taking care of yourself. For some students, this will be the first holiday at home after adjusting to college life, being more independent, and living a very different lifestyle than high school. It might take some clear communication and negotiation to deal with the changes and work through the differences. Learning to set limits with others' expectations of you and knowing when to compromise will help you to stay centered and focused. There may be ongoing conflicts that don't get completely resolved over the holidays, and learning to anticipate and accept this may help you to make the most of what you do have.

Part of what can be comforting about going home for some folks is that some things do stay the same, home is familiar. The challenge may be in balancing the differences with the familiar and recognizing that home may not be the same as you left it, just as you aren't the same as when you left. Using the strategies above can guide you in negotiating your way through the changes, reducing stress, and rejuvenating yourself.