INTEGRATED HEALTH INSTITUTE PRESENTS

The Holiday Compass

Keep Your Peace, Find Your Joy

Five weeks on pressure, family, burnout, joy, and the year ahead. For people who carry a lot, and the people they carry it with.

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Because a successful life should feel as good as it looks.

INTRODUCTION

Before You Begin

The season from early November to New Year's Day asks a lot of the people who already carry the most. This guide walks with you through it in five weeks, from the last days of fall, through Thanksgiving and Christmas, to the turn of the new year.

Who this guide is for

You lead teams, see patients, argue cases, run a business, or hold a household together. You may be the first in your family to do what you do. You may send money home, help with a parent's bills, or keep a younger cousin's tuition on track. Your house may be the one everyone comes to. At work, you may be the only one in the room who looks like you, and you've learned to be twice as prepared because of it.

You may be part of a couple with two demanding careers and two families, each with its own traditions and its own expectations of you. You are good at carrying things. This guide is about what that carrying costs, and how to get some of the season back without letting go of the people you carry it for.

Where this guide starts

Most holiday advice is written as if a person stands alone: your needs, your boundaries, your household of two or four. This guide starts somewhere else.

It starts from the understanding that you live inside a web of relationships: parents and grandparents, aunties and uncles, cousins who are really siblings, church family, play cousins, and chosen family. It treats those relationships as a source of strength, not a problem to manage. It assumes that respect for elders matters, that hosting and caregiving are shared work, that faith may be at the center of your season, that your success belongs in part to the people who made it possible, and that the holidays hold the people you've lost alongside the people at the table.

From there, it asks a practical question: how do you stay well inside all of that? Your

well-being and your place among your people are not in competition. The goal is not to step back from your family. It's to stay close to them and still be yourself. Take what fits your family. Leave what doesn't.

How each week works

- **The reading.** A clinical look at the pressures of that part of the season and what helps.
- **Words you can use.** Language that protects your peace and the relationship at the same time.
- **For couples.** What the topic looks like inside a partnership that joins two families.
- **The Dr. Kim Perspective.** One idea from my work with clients to take with you.
- **Your Holiday Peace Practice.** A short exercise, with room to write.

Read one section each week. If you are part of a couple, read together and do the practices side by side.

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WEEK	TOPIC	SEASON
1	Perfection, Pressure & the Power of No	**Fall**
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3	Running on Empty	**Early winter**
4	Making Room for Joy	**Christmas**
5	A Different Kind of Success	**Winter & New Year**

FALL

WEEK 1

Perfection, Pressure & the Power of No

You can love people without making everything perfect, or being available for everything.



It's 11 p.m. the night before everyone comes. The food for thirty is prepped, the good dishes are out, and you're wiping the counters a second time because your aunt notices everything. Everyone else is asleep. You're not sure when this stopped being fun.

If you're the one who made it (the first to finish the degree, the one with the bigger house, the one the family points to), the holiday can start to feel like a showing. The table, the house, and the way guests are received reflect on your parents and on the family name. That pressure is real, and it comes from love. It's also heavy.

Perfectionism rarely looks like perfectionism

It looks like being prepared. Being responsible. Caring about doing things well. Underneath, it is often driven by something less comfortable: a fear of disappointing people, of losing control, of being seen as less than capable.

For many professionals, it started as a survival skill. You learned early to be twice as good so no one could question whether you belonged. That standard doesn't clock out in December. It moves into your kitchen. So you manage the season instead of living in it, and the holiday looks wonderful to everyone else while costing you more than anyone knows.

The meaning of the holiday has always lived in the gathering, not in flawless hosting. The dish your cousin brings that isn't quite right is part of the tradition. So is the grandmother who insists on doing it her way.

Every yes has a cost

By the first week of December, your calendar may hold the church program, your nephew's recital, a client dinner, two family gatherings in two states, and a committee you agreed to chair in October. You didn't decide any of this. It accumulated, one reasonable yes at a time.

In families where showing up is how love is measured, no can sound like "I don't care." And a flat no to a parent, grandparent, or elder can read as disrespect. So you keep saying yes. But every yes comes out of your time, your energy, and eventually your patience with the people you love most. Repeated over a season, it becomes exhaustion and quiet resentment.

A no that protects the relationship

The goal isn't to stop showing up. It's to show up in a way you can keep doing. A boundary can be built around the relationship instead of around you: *I want to keep showing up for this family, and I can't do that if I'm running on empty.*

What helps

- **Let some things be imperfect on purpose.** Pick one. Leave it.
- **Return to shared hosting.** A potluck isn't a lesser holiday. In many families, it's the original one.
- **Ask an elder what matters most to them this year.** The answer is often simpler than the standard you've set.
- **Pause before you answer.** "Let me check and call you back" gives you room without closing a door.
- **Say yes to the relationship and adjust the request.** Offer what you can give, not only what you can't.
- **Raise it privately and early.** Never in front of the whole family, and never the week of.
- **Use the family's own channels.** A sibling, cousin, or trusted elder can sometimes carry the message better than you can.

- **Let someone be disappointed.** Disappointment isn't a break in the relationship.

Words you can use

- "Mom, I want to be there, and I want to be well when I get there. I'll come for dinner Saturday, not the whole weekend."
- "Auntie, I can't host this year. I'll bring two dishes and stay to help clean up."
- "Pastor, I can't lead the program this year, but you'll see me Sunday."
- "Let me talk it over with my husband and call you back tomorrow."

For Couples

Perfectionism often shows up as a quiet split in standards: one partner wants it done right, the other wants it done. Each of you name the two or three things that truly matter, and let the rest be good enough. Then decide together and decline together. Each partner delivers the news to their own family, so neither becomes the one everyone blames.

THE DR. KIM PERSPECTIVE

The skill most successful people need isn't how to do more. It's how to stop performing long enough to notice what they've already built, and how to tolerate someone else's disappointment without abandoning themselves to fix it.

Your Holiday Peace Practice

Write down three expectations you've set for yourself this season. Mark each one: *necessary*, *meaningful*, or *habit*. Ask whether it's yours or the family's. Drop at least one habit. Then, before your next yes, ask: *Do I want to do this, or do I want to avoid how I'll feel if I don't?* If it's the second, wait 24 hours.

The holidays are not a performance review. No one is scoring this but you.

THANKSGIVING

WEEK 2

Love, Family & the Holiday Table

Staying close to your partner, and yourself, when the whole family is at the table.



The argument started over whose family gets Thanksgiving dinner and whose gets dessert. Forty minutes later, it was about something else: who always gives in, who does all the planning, and who stopped asking how the other was doing sometime around October. Then you walked in, your great-aunt asked when you're "finally" having children, and within ten minutes you felt 16 again.

Marriage joins two families, not just two people. So Thanksgiving tests more than your schedule. It tests how two families, each with its own rules about respect and belonging, make room for each other, and how the two of you stay a team in the middle of it.

Where couples feel it

- Two sets of family rules. One of you grew up with "we go home for every holiday, no question." The other grew up with "we decide as a couple." Neither is wrong.
- Obligations to parents and elders that aren't optional. Who hosts, who cooks, who sits where, and how long you stay all carry meaning.
- One partner carrying most of the planning, cooking, and remembering for both families.
- Different ideas about spending, gifts, and how much to help family financially.
- Time together that's all logistics and no conversation.

The fight is rarely about the plan. It's about feeling unheard, unappreciated, or unimportant, or about feeling that your family isn't respected.

Why family gatherings pull you back

Families run on roles built over decades: the responsible one, the peacemaker, the fixer, the one who made it. Walk back into the house and the old role is waiting, regardless of who you've become. Add advice no one asked for, teasing that stings, questions about money, marriage, children, or weight, and comparisons to cousins.

Much of Western family therapy treated healthy adulthood as separation from family. That isn't the goal here. Closeness, involvement in each other's lives, and deference to elders can be signs of a healthy family. A grandmother asking about your marriage may be doing exactly what she believes love requires. Hearing the care inside the question changes how you answer it. It doesn't mean you have to accept treatment that harms you. The work is staying close and still staying yourself.

What helps

- **Name both families' expectations out loud** before you negotiate. Many couples argue about a rule only one of them knew existed.
- **Never ask your partner to choose between you and their mother.** Ask how the two of you can honor both families this year.
- **Split the invisible work.** Cooking, remembering, buying, and calling are labor. Name it and divide it.
- **Know which conversation will get to you** before you walk in. You can usually predict it.
- **Defer in tone, hold firm in substance.** You can be gracious and still not discuss it.
- **Use the family's own peacemakers.** An elder who has your back can redirect a relative better than you can.
- **Make honor visible.** If you can't be there, a call to an elder or a dish sent ahead can matter as much as attendance.
- **Step outside when you need to.** Take a cousin and a plate. A walk is not a retreat.
- **Remember who isn't at the table.** The first Thanksgiving after a loss changes everything. Make room to grieve together.

Words you can use

- "Grandma, I know you ask because you care about me. I'm doing well. Tell me how you've been."
- "Uncle, that's something my wife and I are deciding together. I'll let you know when there's news."
- "I hear you, and I love you. Let's enjoy today."

For Couples

Agree on a signal and an exit plan before you arrive. Present decisions as "we." Decide who handles which relatives, and defend your partner to your own family, not the other way around. When your spouse has to defend themselves to your people, they're alone in the room.

THE DR. KIM PERSPECTIVE

In Emotionally Focused Therapy, we look beneath the surface argument for the need driving it. A fight about whose family to visit may really be a question: Do I matter to you as much as they do? And in family systems work, the goal was never distance. It's being able to stay close to your people and still be yourself in the room.

Your Holiday Peace Practice

Sit down together for 20 minutes before Thanksgiving, phones away. Take turns answering. The listener's only job is to understand.

1. What would make this season feel meaningful to you?
2. What does each of our families expect, and which of those matter most to us?
3. Which conversation at the table is most likely to get to one of us, and how will we handle it together?
4. When will we protect time for just us?

You can honor your family and still honor the person, and the partnership, you've worked to build.

The office closed for the Thanksgiving weekend. You hosted, cooked, drove your grandmother home, covered your brother's share of the groceries, and cleaned up. On day three you were snapping at your kids, checking email in the bathroom, and lying awake at 2 a.m. running through January. Everyone else went home rested. You went back to work Monday.

For many professionals, December exhaustion didn't start in December. It's the bill for a year of carrying: leading at work, holding the family together, and for many, being the only one in the room, with the extra scrutiny, the code-switching, and the pressure to prove yourself twice. Time off doesn't settle that bill, especially when the time off is spent taking care of everyone else.

Signs worth paying attention to

- You can't relax even when there's nothing to do.
- You're short-tempered with the people you came home to rest with.

- You feel flat, numb, or detached.
- New requests make you resentful, and rest makes you feel guilty.
- You notice problems before anyone else, fix them quietly, and never ask for help.

Burnout isn't ordinary tiredness. Sleep fixes tired. Burnout is a deeper depletion that drains your capacity to engage with life, including the parts you used to enjoy.

The weight of being the strong one

Many professionals are their family's success story: the first to finish a degree, the one who sends money home, the one relatives call when something goes wrong. Women in particular are often handed the role of the strong one early and expected to carry it without complaint. That role brings real pride. It also brings an exhaustion a long weekend can't touch.

In families built on taking care of each other, giving isn't a problem. It's the point. The problem is when it flows only one way. Overfunctioning is consistently doing more than your share, often making up for what others won't or can't do. When the same person always gives and never receives, the family loses too. Relatives who want to help get crowded out, and elders who have wisdom to offer get managed instead of consulted.

Getting help isn't betrayal

In some families, talking about stress outside the house still carries stigma: "We don't put our business in the street." "Just pray on it." Prayer and therapy can work together. Many of my clients bring their faith into the room with them. Seeking help is not a betrayal of your family, your faith, or the people who sacrificed for you. Staying well is how you keep showing up for them.

What restoration takes

- **A hard line between work and home.** Delete the email app for a week if you need to.
- **Receiving is participation.** Refusing help can be its own kind of disrespect. Let people give to you.

- **Hand something off and don't take it back.** Let people do it their way.
- **Set a giving budget** for money and time before December, and say it once.
- **Spread the kinkeeping.** The calls, cards, and reminders that hold a family together are often carried by one woman. Share them.
- **Name the sandwich.** If you're caring for children and parents at once, tell your siblings and ask for specific help, by date.
- **Rest in the ways that restore you.** Worship, a kitchen table, music, a long talk with people who knew you before your title, or an hour alone all count.
- **Sleep, movement, and daylight,** which is shorter now.

If low mood, exhaustion, or loss of interest lasts or starts affecting daily life, that's a signal to talk with a professional, not something a few more days off will solve.

For couples

Burnout in one partner often looks like distance to the other. Say it plainly: *I'm depleted, and it isn't about you.* And if one of you has become the default caretaker for both families (the calls to both mothers, the money to both sides, the plans for every elder), make a list together of everything December requires, including the remembering. Then divide it out loud.

THE DR. KIM PERSPECTIVE

Being able to carry a heavy load doesn't mean the load isn't heavy. The person who looks most in control is often the one least comfortable admitting they need anything. Healthy families, like healthy relationships, run both directions.

Your Holiday Peace Practice

Ask yourself: *What am I carrying that someone else could reasonably carry?* Name one commitment to drop, one task to hand off and who gets it, and one thing you'll do this week only because you like it.

Drop:

Hand off, to:

Enjoy:

You don't have to be everyone's strength while quietly running out of your own.

EARLY WINTER

WEEK 3

Running on Empty

Burnout, and the question of who takes care of the one who takes care of everyone.

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Enjoy:

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CHRISTMAS

WEEK 4

Making Room for Joy

The difference between getting through the holidays and actually being there.



You were there. You remember the parking. You remember answering a text from a colleague in the hallway. You don't remember much of the story your grandfather told, the one everyone laughed at.

You can attend every gathering, buy every gift, cook every dish, and still feel like you weren't really there. When your days are built on deadlines and outcomes, even celebration starts to get organized and managed. Joy doesn't respond well to management.

Joy is something we make together

For many families, the deepest joy of the season is shared. It's in the kitchen with the women who've cooked together for thirty years. It's in the music, the card games, the dancing, the candle lighting, the late-night worship service, and the kids running through the house. Whether your family keeps Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, Las Posadas, Three Kings Day, or several at once, the gathering itself is the point.

You can't take that in while you're running it. When you're at the stove thinking about tomorrow's errands, or on the couch reviewing next week's meetings in your head, you can get through the whole season without experiencing any of it.

Joy and grief at the same table

Shared joy also holds shared grief. The holidays bring back the people who are no

longer at the table: the grandmother whose recipe you're making, the uncle who always said grace, the friend you lost this year. In many traditions, remembering them out loud is part of the celebration, not a break from it. Joy doesn't require pretending the hard parts aren't there.

What helps

- **Join, don't manage.** Be in the kitchen to talk, not to supervise.
- **Put the phone in another room** during the conversations that matter.
- **Ask an elder for a story.** How did your family celebrate when they were young? Who taught them?
- **Make room for the empty chair.** A toast, a favorite dish, a story, or a photo on the table can let grief and joy share the same room.
- **Keep the traditions that actually bring life.** Let the others rest.
- **Spend time with the people who feel easy to be around,** including the cousin you only see once a year.
- **Take a quiet hour too.** Joy can also be a slow morning alone. Both count.

For Couples

Make a few moments that belong to just the two of you. Drive around to look at lights. Go out for breakfast. Spend one evening with phones off and no plans. These small moments do more for connection than any big gesture.

THE DR. KIM PERSPECTIVE

Well-being isn't only about handling responsibilities well. It also depends on being able to feel pleasure, connection, and meaning in the moment. For people used to performing, learning to enjoy something without making it productive is real growth, and it often takes practice.

Your Holiday Peace Practice

Block one hour this week for something you genuinely enjoy. No errands, no work, no multitasking, no goal. Then, at one family gathering, ask someone older than you for a story you've never heard. Write down what they told you.

My hour:

The story:

Don't spend so much time preparing for the holidays that you miss them.

WINTER & NEW YEAR

WEEK 5

A Different Kind of Success

Your next season of success should include your well-being.

Before the year even ends, many people already have next year's goals in a document. Revenue targets. Promotions. A launch date. The list is mostly about what you'll get done.

Before you add to it, consider a different question: *How do I want to live this year, and who do I want to bring with me?*

Success has never been a solo project

Your success was built on the sacrifices of parents and grandparents, the support of a church or community, and the people who believed in you before anyone else did. It also carries a responsibility forward: to your family, to the next generation, to the community that made it possible. That gives your work meaning beyond a title.

It can also become a weight. You can hit every milestone and still feel chronically stressed, disconnected from the people you love, and unsure why none of it feels like enough. You may believe you have to carry everyone's hopes alone, or that resting would betray the people who sacrificed for you. It wouldn't. Honoring them includes staying well enough to keep showing up.

Questions worth sitting with

- Do I have the energy to enjoy the life I've built, and to share it?
- Are my closest relationships getting real attention, or what's left over?

- Who poured into me, and who am I pouring into?
- Where am I carrying alone what my family or community could carry with me?
- What would success look like if it included how I feel?

Five areas to focus on

Skip the long list of resolutions. Choose a few areas that deserve more attention:

1. **Emotional health.** Notice your stress before it becomes a crisis. Get support when you need it, from your people, your faith, and a professional.
2. **Family and relationships.** Invest in the conversations and closeness that matter most, across generations.
3. **Sustainable work.** Ask whether your current pace is something you can keep up for five more years, and whether your workplace lets you be fully yourself.
4. **Legacy.** Decide what you want to pass on besides money: stories, values, recipes, time.
5. **Boundaries.** Decide on purpose where your time, energy, and giving go.

Whether you welcome the new year at a Watch Night service, around a family table, or quietly at home, set these intentions alongside your own goals.

For Couples: start the year as partners, not co-managers

Talk about what worked this year, what wore you down, and what you want to feel different. Include the conversations that tend to get postponed: emotional needs, intimacy, money, how you'll support both families, and shared goals. Your relationship deserves planning, not just what's left after everything else is done.

THE DR. KIM PERSPECTIVE

One of the most important shifts I see in clients is moving from a life organized around achievement to one organized around alignment: what you do matches what you value. Success shouldn't require you to keep trading away your health or your relationships. Ambition

and balance aren't opposites--neither are productivity and presence.

Your Holiday Peace Practice: New Year Reflection

Finish these six sentences. Put your answers where you'll see them, and check back in March.

This year, I want less of

I want to make more room for

One boundary I need to strengthen is

One relationship I want to invest in is

I want my success to make room for

Success, for me this year, means

You've worked hard to build a successful life.
Make sure it's one you actually enjoy living.

INTEGRATED HEALTH INSTITUTE

Work with Dr. Kim

If this season feels heavier than it looks from the outside, you don't have to sort it out alone. Integrated Health Institute offers private, virtual therapy for professionals and couples, with care that respects your culture, your faith, and your family.

Therapy

Individual and couples therapy by telehealth for clients in Louisiana, Michigan, and New Jersey.

ALIGN™ Coaching

Executive coaching for professionals who want their success to feel as good as it looks.

TO SCHEDULE A CONSULTATION

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ABOUT DR. KIM

Kimberly J. Chandler, Ph.D., LPC, is a psychotherapist, executive coach, and communication scholar. She holds a Ph.D. in Communication Studies and an M.A. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She has been a professor/scholar for 25+ years and created ALIGN™ Coaching for executives and professionals. Her work brings together clinical care, communication, and relationship health for people who carry a lot.

This guide offers general information, not therapy or a diagnosis. If you or someone you love is in crisis, call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) or call **911**.

Because a successful life should feel as good as it looks.