



# An African American Holiday Self-Care Guide

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## 1. Introduction: What is Self-Care?

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year!” is a phrase we often start hearing as soon as the Halloween decorations come down and the leaves have fallen off the trees. It’s a time when we fellowship and celebrate with family and friends, participate in holiday traditions, and unpack and unwind from the busy months behind us.

However, for many in the African American community, the holiday season can bring on feelings of isolation, grief, stress, family challenges, and trauma. Our actual experiences often fall far short of social expectations. Burdened by painful memories and all those expectations, African Americans can be shamed or even stigmatized if they show that they’re not feeling the holiday spirit. Societal pressures may force them to conform and participate in the “joy” of holiday season—even though, especially at this time, the emotional pain they carry can be amplified.

With the 2023 holiday season upon us, it’s important for each of us to reflect on our own journey and see what that tells us about our needs. This means observing how we engage with the holiday season. With that kind of reflection in mind, this guide provides tips on coping with the “Holiday Blues” – including loss, grief, and the full range of stressors—and guidance on our journey of emotional healing, so we can approach the holiday season with love and grace.

### Mental Health

Many people experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, and loneliness during the holiday season. Of course, these are not mental illnesses, but they do require coping, and they can raise the risk of mental health challenges. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), about 1 in 5 adults experience mental health conditions each year, but African Americans are 20% more likely to experience serious psychological distress than any other racial group.<sup>1</sup>

Another major concern is the rise in suicide among African Americans, particularly among Black youth ages 15-24. In 2017, suicide was the leading cause of death for African Americans in that age group. Suicide also has a ripple effect in the African American community, resonating with other tragedies such as racial trauma and violence, raising the risk of mental health challenges.

In the presence of these sobering statistics, we might wonder how all this is really affecting us, especially during the holiday season. Where are we particularly vulnerable? What are the strengths that can help us cope? How do we respect our honest emotional experience, even when that experience doesn’t fit the image we want to project? We can’t “will” a complex set of realities into being simple, but many people try. The reality is that the stigma around mental health conditions has perplexed our community and made many of us not pursue care when we need it.

So, what can we do? Let’s talk Self-care!

### Self-Care



“Self-care” is a commonly used term, but it can look different to different people. The National Institute of Mental Health defines self-care as “taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your physical and mental health.”<sup>2</sup> During a busy holiday season that brings on many emotions, it’s important to find time to intentionally practice self-care. It may seem like we don’t have time, but considering the complications that can arise when we **don’t** practice self-care, self-care really saves a lot of time. Here are some helpful tips for practicing self-care:

- **K(NO)w your limits:** The holidays can put high expectations on some people, and that can quickly lead to increased stress, exhaustion. It can even lead to a state often called “burnout,” where we lose our energy and enthusiasm—and feel like we don’t care about things that are usually important to us. It’s important to know when your body and mind are telling you to slow down, and to respect that message. Setting boundaries around “when enough is enough” is an integral part of knowing your limits. When you say “yes” to everything, that means you’re saying “no” to something—and usually it’s your own self-care that you’re neglecting. Setting limits and establishing boundaries means you’ll participate in certain activities, say no to others, and recognize when you just can’t finish all the tasks you’d like to complete. This wise use of judgment will give you an opportunity to be reasonable with yourself and make time for self-care.
- **Set Reasonable Expectations:** Since the holiday season can carry very high expectations, it’s important to check in with yourself and recognize your own expectations and hopes. Having an honest and realistic check-in about your expectations for this holiday season will help you set standards for the ways you respond to the many situations in your life.
- **Practice Gratitude and Focus on Positivity:** Identify, remind yourself, and journal about what you’re grateful for during this holiday season—focusing, not on the stressors, but on the aspects of the season that you consider positive. Focus on your favorite things about this time of year and what brings you pleasure or joy in the holiday season. Remember, it can look different for different people. For some, it might look like gratitude for getting a day off to breathe, relax, and disconnect from work. For others, it might look like gratitude for health and the ability to celebrate another year. Reminding yourself of your gratitude each day and focusing on what you find positive will allow negative thoughts to move to the back of your brain for a while. Gratitude is also a good way to make it easier to find hope, because some of the same brain chemicals are released in both experiences.
- **Be Kind to your Mind:** The holiday season is a season of giving. It’s important to take time to give to yourself as well, by being gentle with your thoughts. Allow yourself the extra grace and give yourself time to complete errands and activities. Being kind to your mind allows you to minimize stress and improve your mental health.

While mental and physical self-care are paramount, we often tend to neglect some of the other aspects of “self” that need attention. There are many different forms of self-care that you might consider welcoming, so you can feel your best in all areas of life. These include<sup>3</sup>:



- **Emotional Self-Care:** Your ability to regulate your emotions to cope with difficult situations is essential to your quality of life, and so are your efforts to connect with your emotions and process them. Activities that can help you regulate your emotions include:
  - Being aware of the emotions that tend to be the hardest for you to regulate, and keeping watch for them, so you can notice them earlier
  - Breathing slowly and deeply when you start to notice that you're getting upset
  - Remembering that you're in the "here and now," by noticing the people and objects around you, the ground under your feet, and your other physical sensations
  - Having trustworthy people you can talk to safely, people who will understand and care and won't judge or shame you
  - Journaling
  - Practicing gratitude
  
- **Spiritual Self-Care:** This form of self-care can be helpful for anyone, whether you're religious, spiritual, atheist, agnostic, etc. It encourages you to engage in efforts to foster the growth and healing of your soul. Spiritual self-care helps you feel more grounded, especially if you're struggling with grief and loss, anger, frustration, uncertainty, etc. A few examples of spiritual self-care activities are:
  - Spending time in nature
  - Meditating
  - Creating a vision board
  
- **Professional Self-Care:** Work life can become stressful and demanding, with long hours, heavy workload, etc. Bringing professional self-care into your life can help prevent burnout and keep you motivated and inspired in your career. A healthy work/life balance increases productivity, focus, and engagement. It also minimizes stress and makes you better at completing work-related tasks. Activities include:
  - Setting reminders to take breaks
  - Designating some "Me" time at the end of your workday
  - Taking a mental health day when you need it
  
- **Environmental Self-Care:** Your environment isn't just the neighborhood you call home. It's also the air inside your home, the clutter on your desk, any dishes that might be stacked up in your kitchen sink, piles of clothes on your bed, even the space inside your car. Your environment is the space where you spend most of your time. Environmental self-care—at home or at work—is about creating a space that makes you feel grounded and helps you keep your focus and concentration. Activities that promote environmental self-care include:
  - Decluttering personal spaces so they don't distract or depress you
  - Adding any scent, you'd like to your home's atmosphere (or eliminating any scent you don't like)
  - Organizing your home, car, and workspace to make them look the way you want.



[Do you want to build a self-care snowman? \(Click link for instructions\)](#)

## 2. Grief and the “Holiday Blues”

“Who’s going to cook the turkey? Mom always used to do it!” is one of those things many people will hear this holiday season. Even grief that has been processed and seemingly “laid to rest” might rise again for birthdays and holidays. Most of us tend to think of grief in terms of the loss of a loved one, but loss can be connected with any process or event that disrupts or challenges your sense of normalcy<sup>4</sup>, including the loss of:

- A family member, friend, or pet
- A marriage, serious relationship, or friendship
- Your home, neighborhood, or community
- Your job or career
- Your financial stability
- A dream or a goal
- Your health or the health of someone you love
- Your fertility or your hope that you might be able to have a child

Grief can come in waves of emotions, so people experience their emotions on a spectrum that can run from sadness to anger, to joy—and possibly just “going on autopilot.”

Grief is complex. There are many ways you can experience grief, so a few forms of grief that are common during the holiday season are described below:

- **Anticipatory grief:** Anticipating the holiday season can be worrisome and overwhelming for families who have experienced the death of a loved one, and the emotions can become even more difficult as the holidays arrive. Memories of activities that you once shared with your loved ones can invade the holiday rituals. It can be painful even to find joy in celebration—at a time that was once filled with joy. To cope with anticipatory grief in the holiday season, the first step is just to recognize that it **is** difficult. That recognition can remind you to prepare for support. Surrounding yourself with people who love and support you can help you share memories and find comfort in connecting over those memories.
- **Cumulative grief:** Throughout the year, we may experience many different types of grief, but we might not allow ourselves the vulnerability to express our emotions or the time to process them. Sometimes it’s easier to “just get through it,” because we don’t know how strong the emotions will be if we really pay attention to them. You might be grieving the loss of a family member, grieving the loss of a job, and going through a crisis of confidence—all at the same time. This kind of combination is often called “cumulative grief.” In the “normal” (non-holiday)



months, you might just be “keeping on keeping on,” but during the holiday season, it can be harder to ignore grief and anxiety. Alone or in families, people tend to reflect on the year behind them and remember holidays past. To cope with cumulative grief, it’s important to create a space to process each individual loss and to be aware of your thoughts and feelings. Bringing awareness to this type of grief allows you to grieve at your own pace.

- **Collective grief:** The past few years, there have been far too many major public tragedies, such as mass school shootings, police brutality, pandemic, wars, natural disasters, and genocides. All those events were escalating as we faced a pandemic that shut down our world for two years and changed the face of “normal.” In many ways, our lives have been completely changed. We also live in a world where millions of people live in poverty, oppression, illness, and brutality. As a country, and as African Americans, we are experiencing collective grief, struggling through these major traumas and losses and trying to stay hopeful for a better future. During the holiday season, you can connect more deeply with your community, getting involved through volunteering, hosting support groups, or participating in events such as decorating local facilities or faith communities.

Grief is often the “elephant in the room.” It’s there, but no one wants to talk about it, because it might bring up emotions that make people uncomfortable and interrupt the “spirit of celebration.” On the other hand, we know that **not** acknowledging these feelings can make the whole situation more uncomfortable, and even the spirit of celebration can be a source of pain to someone who’s grieving. If talking about it would be uncomfortable, you might start by expressing your love and support for someone who’s grieving, even if you have to catch them alone in a hallway. The link below offers a few examples of affirmative words to offer someone who’s hurting.

[Words of Affirmation in a Season of Grief \(Click link for instructions\)](#)

### 3. Stress During the Holiday Season

The holiday season is one of the busiest times of the year. There’s always plenty to do, with hectic calendars, shorter days, social deadlines, gift-giving, the approach of the end of the year, the planning, the rushing, the worrying, preparing, running errands, shopping, and celebrating multiple holidays. Even the parts of this you enjoy can all be stressors. They can lead you to be overwhelmed, anxious, and overstressed.

It's normal to feel the stress during this busy time, but there can be pressure to keep a smile on your face during the holidays. Trying to respond to holiday social pressures—or trying to escape those pressures—people often do the exact opposite of what holidays are intended to do: bring people together. Instead, these pressures can lead people to retreat and isolate, and they can increase loneliness and sadness. Below are nine recommendations for de-stressing during the holiday season:



1. **Say “No.”** Many people feel guilty for saying no. But remember what you read a few pages back: When you say yes to everything—you are saying no to something. If you practice it, you can get comfortable with saying “no” or “no, thank you” and ending it with a period—so it’s not “No, but...” or “No, I’m sorry...” as if it were an invitation for them to talk you into it. Saying no in a way that sounds real and sincere will allow others to understand your boundaries and know that you’re choosing to take care of your own physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.
2. **Rest.** Rest and relaxation are important, particularly during this season, when so many activities are making demands on us. When we’re stressed during this season, it puts stress on our bodies, which wears us down more. We might not get enough sleep, a costly choice in terms of our bodies and our brains. Our muscles become tense, our heart rate increases, and our other systems overreact as if they’re under attack. Without the proper rest and relaxation, all this stress can lower our resilience (our ability to “bounce back” ) and our ability to resist physical and mental health challenges. It can even make us gain weight or lower our immune responses. Allowing yourself to rest, relax, and get enough sleep will help you manage and cope with those feelings of stress.
3. **Be Good to Your Body.** Along with rest and relaxation, our bodies also need exercise and healthy food. During the holidays, it can be tempting to suspend our exercise routines, eat a lot of those holiday goodies, and ignore the healthy stuff. But exercise and healthy food are important tools in reducing the effects of stress and keeping the body and brain healthy.
4. **Delegate.** Delegation is a concept that we all understand, but not many of us are good at carrying it out. Delegation is an important work and life skill—particularly during the holiday season—because one person simply can’t do everything. We all need to learn how to assign tasks and responsibilities to the appropriate people. It will lighten our load and empower others. But, even more important, once we’ve delegated those tasks and responsibilities, we need to learn how to let go of them, knowing they’re out of our hands.
5. **Accept help.** Of course, delegation goes hand-in-hand with accepting help. Accepting help may seem easy for some, but it can be a challenge for many of us. Reaching out to others for help is a sign of strength because it reflects humility and it shows you can recognize your limitations, even if they’re only limitations in time, energy, or resources. The goal is not just to survive, but to thrive. We might be able to do everything ourselves and still survive, but we’re not likely to thrive under those conditions.
6. **Breathe.** When we feel stressed, it often affects our breathing, which affects the all-important flow of oxygen to the brain. We might be so preoccupied that we forget to breathe calmly and deeply, or our anxiety might be telling us to constrict our breathing. Under stress, our heart rate and blood pressure increase, which can cause some people to breathe rapidly and shallowly. Pausing to breathe slowly and deeply a few times a day—and at stressful moments—can help you slow your pace down and move you toward a relaxed state. And when that air goes deep in your lungs, you might think more clearly and make wiser decisions.





7. **Laugh.** As the old saying goes, “A good laugh recharges your battery.” A good laugh not only makes you feel good, but it also causes physical changes in your body. It allows your systems and organs to take in more oxygen and prompts your brain to release dopamine and endorphins. Laughter also relaxes and relieves some of our stress responses.
8. **Listen to music.** Music can be a great source of stress relief, quickly shifting our moods and letting negative thoughts leave our brains and bodies. Of course, different types of music work for different people at different times. There may be times when you need something calm and soothing to help your body and mind relax, times when you need to play something loud and lively so you can dance or sing at the top of your lungs, and times when you need something you can rely on to help you cry. Music can be a healer.
9. **Keep realistic expectations.** As mentioned before, during the holiday season, we (and the people around us) can have very high expectations. Keeping your expectations realistic—not too high and not too low—can help you keep your emotions balanced and manageable.
10. **Practice self-compassion.** Particularly in the behavioral health field, most of us find it easier to feel compassion for others than for ourselves. We forget that, as we learn self-compassion, even our compassion toward others grows stronger. If memories and emotions are troubling and painful, practicing self-compassion will help you experience healing through those memories and emotions, rather than just tolerating them. You can start the process simply: Find some time during the holiday season to sit with yourself and discover something about yourself that you like. Practice seeing yourself the way the people who love you see you, and telling yourself the things they’d want to tell you if they were sitting next to you. Self-compassion helps us become less critical of ourselves and gives us more room for blessings and growth.<sup>5</sup>

## Emotional Healing

Emotional healing is defined as “the process of acknowledging, allowing, integrating, and processing painful life experiences and strong emotions.”<sup>6</sup> Emotional healing may involve a number of practices, including empathy, self-regulation, self-compassion, self-acceptance, mindfulness, and integration. It can be difficult to feel emotionally healed during the holidays, because so many feelings tend to be activated and re-activated at this time. Here are some ideas for emotional healing:

- Creating and re-discovering new rituals and celebrations can help the healing process with family members and friends.
- Having a trustworthy support system is also important, helping you deal with strong emotions by communicating with someone who really listens and understands.
- Finding healthy ways to cope with emotions can be empowering as well. It can help you along your journey to emotional healing, and it can help you avoid emotional outbursts and other reactions that would otherwise cause trouble in your life and relationships.



Learning to recognize the people, words, and circumstances that tend to activate your troubling urges or out-of-control emotions is also an important resource for emotional healing. This might be, for example, a person who is close to you. It might also be a word, a song, a type of food, an event—anything that reminds you of past trauma. Or it might be anyone or anything that gives you cravings to use alcohol or drugs, binge out on holiday cookies, start smoking again, or get involved in other activities that have gotten out of control in the past.

When you learn to recognize your activating factors—often called “triggers”—that recognition can help you listen to yourself and “check in” on your emotions, your urges, and the sensations in your body. It’s important to remember that our activating factors are often rooted in past traumatic experiences—or in patterns of compulsive or addictive behaviors we've developed.

Even though there’s no “cure” for activating factors, you can move toward emotional healing by identifying what causes you to be upset or feel compulsive and learning how to manage it. Emotional healing can help you recognize where those feelings are coming from and respond in ways that will help you keep them under control. And remember: You don’t have to do this alone!

#### **4. Social Connectedness**

Even though the holiday season can bring up many troubling experiences—including stress, isolation, and grief—social connectedness can often help you feel a sense of community and bring you feelings of joy and happiness. Human beings are “hard-wired” to desire a sense of connection and community, even though we might also have fears, disappointments, resentments, and other conflicting feelings. During the holiday season, all those feelings can become more apparent.

Social connectedness is defined as, “the degree to which people have and perceive a desired number, quality, and diversity of relationships that create a sense of belonging, and being cared for, valued, and supported.”<sup>7</sup> Social connectedness is personal and important for our survival. Having relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and community can have a major impact on health and well-being. A few ideas for connecting to community and to others are:

- Volunteering
- Providing support to others
- Hosting small events
- Hosting or helping out at a community food drive
- Serving at a dinner for people experiencing homelessness
- Joining a social group (book club, sports team, musical group, etc.)
- Getting connected with a mutual-support group



## 5. Crisis and Support Hotlines and Warm Lines

Here are just a few examples of national resources for finding support by phone.

### **Crisis Lines**

A crisis call/text line provides immediate emergency telephone counseling and referrals.

National Crisis and Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Dial 988 to get 24/7 support for people in distress, prevention, and crisis resources.

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a crisis counselor 24/7

Veterans and Military Crisis Line: Dial 988, then press 1 after you're connected to 988, for 24/7 confidential support for Veterans, Active Military, and their families and friends.

Veterans & Military Crisis Text Line: text 838255, to connect with a crisis counselor 24/7.

National Call Center for Homeless Veterans: Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless can call 1-877-424-3838 and press 1 for 24/7 help.

Trevor Lifeline: Call 1-866-488-7386 or text SMART to 678678: Provides 24/7 crisis support services for LGBTQ+ young people.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Text NAMI to 741-741, a 24/7 to get crisis support via text, and be connected for free with a trained crisis counselor.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: Call 1-800-799-7233 to get 24/7 confidential support for anyone experience domestic violence or seeking resources and information, available in Spanish and other languages.

### **Warm Lines**

Warm lines are non-emergency/non-crisis call lines that provide additional support when you need it.

Emotional/Mental Health: Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network (GMHCN) Peer2 Peer Warm Line: Call 1-888-945-1414, 24/7 support for people living with behavioral health needs, recovering from trauma or loss, or who are experiencing life's challenges.

CARES (Certified Addiction Recovery Empowerment Specialist) Recovery Warm Line: Call 1-844-326-5400.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline: Call 1-800-950-6264, a peer-support service providing information, resource referrals, and support to those living with a mental health condition, their family members and caregivers, and mental health providers.



## 6. Activities for Holiday Fun

[Tony Robbins Results Coaching](#): This article provides 25 fun holiday activity ideas to do with friends and family!

[60 Great Christmas Activities For Kids, Adults, and Families \(countryliving.com\)](#): 60 fun and festive Christmas activities to enjoy during the holiday season!

[5 Easy, Fun Holiday Traditions for Black Families - Brown Mamas](#): 5 easy, fun holiday traditions for Black families!

["7 Unique Black Family Christmas Traditions Worth Adopting 2022 - Spotcovery"](#) This article provides 7 unique Black family Christmas traditions worth adopting

[30 COVID-safe holiday activities and new traditions to start this year - Today's Parent \(todaysparent.com\)](#): This article provides 30 COVID-19 safe holiday activities and other traditions to start.

[Black New Year's Eve traditions that COVID-19 can't cancel \(today.com\)](#): This article provides 11 Black New Year's Eve traditions that are COVID-19 safe!

[Holiday+Tip+Sheet\\_Holiday+Budgeting\\_2022.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#): A holiday budgeting worksheet!

[Holiday+Tip+Sheet\\_Holiday+Savings+Tips\\_2022.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#): A holiday saving tips guide!

[Holiday+Tip+Sheet\\_Holiday+Safety\\_2022.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#): A holiday safety guide!



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