



The Holiday Tapestry and Self-Care

by Bob McDonald

As the holiday season commences, our senses begin to experience the sights of twinkling lights and trees; the smells of pine and cinnamon; the sounds of bells, crackling fires, and traditional music; the tastes of nutmeg, cider, and tasty baked goods; the lighting of candles. It is a tapestry of wonder and awe. Our culture typically communicates to us that this is a time of joy and good will, a time for families and friends to gather in happy celebrations, a time to be happy and merry.

At the same time, our calendars become crowded with obligations and expectations. Homes need to be decorated. Feasts need to be prepared. Family gatherings need to be navigated. Gifts need to be bought. Cards need to be sent. Party RSVPs need to be made. Such tasks can nurture our lives by embracing fond traditions and memories. They can lead us to experience happiness as they help connect us to one another. But these quests for the joy of the season can simultaneously cause stress, sadness, and weariness. Such opportunities and obligations are intricately woven together in the holiday tapestry of the season. Understanding the interplay of commitments and the nurturing of our own well-being is key.

The challenges of the season can be intensified for us seniors. The holidays are difficult for those who have lost loved ones, especially if traditions revolved around them. Feelings of loneliness and isolation can be intensified if we live alone, are away from family, or we do not get the party invitations that previously came our way. Physical limitations may hamper our participation in festivities. We may face financial stress. Perhaps we can no longer host the gatherings that were so dear to us.

The good news is this: the "holiday blues" can be managed. Here are a few strategies to deal with the stresses of the season through a practice of self-care:

- **Recognize and Respect Your Limits:** Be aware of what your body and mind are telling you. Know when to say "enough" or "no." Focus on what is most important to you and what you like to do. Small successful experiences are better than over-extending yourself.

- **Avoid Known Triggers:** Holidays can be a time of painful memories or experiences. If you know that some people or activities or interactions are triggers for you, avoid or minimize them. Find other experiences and people that nurture and fulfill you.
- **Set Reasonable Expectations:** It is easy to have high expectations and hopes for the holidays. Everything around us tells us that "it's the most wonderful time of the year." Unrealistic expectations lead to disappointment. Identify and reframe your expectations by focusing on connecting with others and being grateful rather than striving for perfection. Identify what is truly a priority for you and make conscious efforts to achieve it.
- **Create New Traditions:** Some holiday traditions may no longer be possible, due to the absence of loved ones, lessened abilities, or other factors. You can create new holiday traditions. Some Village members shared with me how they transformed large family Thanksgiving feasts (often characterized by family angst) into smaller potluck gatherings with friends who really care for one another.
- **Focus on Rituals of Self-Care:** Be kind to yourself. Take time to meditate. Go for a walk. Read your favorite book. Listen to music that inspires you.
- **Give of Yourself:** A Villager pointed out that, at this point in our lives, many of us are downsizing. Rather than buying gifts for others, perhaps we give away something we cherish that another might need or love. Give our time to another person or an organization. We all have the experience of not being in contact for a while with someone we care for. Make a call or write a note to that person.

Also, it is good to keep in mind that other people do not necessarily experience or celebrate the holidays as we do. Be mindful of those whose experience differs from ours because of their religion, culture, history, or family background. Be sensitive to these differences.

May our holidays be a tapestry of joy, self-awareness, connection with loved ones, and above all, gratitude.