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THE HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS ISSUE

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A PANDEMIC HOLIDAY:

7 PLANS THAT WON'T
GET CANCELLED

This year has been challenging, unpredictable, and fraught with cancelled plans – from social gatherings and medical treatments to vacations and weddings. As 2020 draws to a close, our new reality has many of us wondering: what will the holiday season look like? Will we be able to see our family and friends? Will all of our holiday traditions be cancelled?

According to a [new survey](#), 49% of Canadians say they have already planned to change their holiday traditions. Of those who intend to make changes, 74% said they would celebrate with close or immediate family members and keep social interactions to a minimum, 30% said they would hold virtual celebrations in lieu of in-person gatherings, and 19% said they plan to cancel celebrations altogether. No matter which of these groups you fall into, it can feel hard to cope and difficult to imagine enjoying the holidays this year.

But when our circumstances feel out of control, Akira by TELUS Health mental health therapist Dylan Zambrano suggests creating routines and experiences that you can rely on to help curb feelings of anxiousness, and restore a sense of calm. With this in mind, here are seven holiday plans to consider making that won't get cancelled.

1. Schedule solitude.

Modern life is often so busy that we leave little time to enjoy simple pleasures in solitude. With more white space in your calendar this holiday season, consider scheduling a block of time for you and you alone. For example, you could take a long bath in the middle of the day, read a book for fun, watch a binge-worthy TV show, or sit with a warm drink and allow yourself to daydream. Rather than waiting until all of your “to do’s” are done (because they might never be), try prioritizing your own pleasure. You will likely notice a shift in your mindset as a result.

2. Try a DIY gift.

Have you ever received a homemade gift and thought, “I wish I had time to do that”? 2020 is a great year to put one of the DIY tutorials you've been pinning to good use and surprise loved ones with special deliveries. From DIY bath bombs and room sprays to homemade granola and steak spice, there are millions of how-to videos available online, and you don't need to be crafty to pull them off.

3. Send holiday cards.

There are plenty of beautiful holiday e-cards out there, but getting a physical greeting in the mail will mean more to your friends and family this year than ever before. You don't need

to have a professional family photo or a custom-designed card – simply sending a hand-written note on a homemade or dollar store card will be equally sentimental.

4. Host a holiday movie watch party.

Pop some popcorn and use Netflix watch party to enjoy a festive film in real-time with your friends, co-workers, or family members. Rest assured that no one can take away your favourite holiday movie traditions!

5. Start a gratitude calendar.

Remember those advent calendars with the little chocolate squares hidden inside? You may already have a version of this in mind for your kids, but try this for yourself: every day in December, write down two things you are grateful for and call, text, or email one person you love, appreciate, respect or admire. At the start of 2021, you will have pages full of reasons to start the new year with a sense of abundance – and you will have made 31 people smile.

6. Volunteer online.

For many Canadians, the holiday season involves a tradition of giving back. Most organizations won't be able to facilitate volunteering in the ways that they normally do. Still, there are lots of groups across the country who are in need of virtual volunteers. [Click here](#) for more information about volunteering virtually.

7. Host a virtual baking or cooking party.

Annual holiday cookie swaps and large dinner parties will likely be off the table this year – and we know that their virtual counterparts aren't the same. But while another Zoom party may not sound exciting, they can still create a sense of connection with people you may typically only see during the holidays. If you usually host a holiday event, a little creativity can go a long way in making a virtual version memorable: try sharing a recipe with attendees ahead of time so you can all cook and enjoy a dish “together”. Or drop off a few homemade gingerbread cookies and decorations to each attendee's doorstep so that everyone can participate in a hands-on activity “together”.

If you're an employer, consider sending small individual gifts to your team members in lieu of a holiday party this year. And whether or not gift-giving is feasible, make sure you take time to thank each employee wholeheartedly. It's been a hard year for everyone, and you made it through together. Making sure your team feels appreciated and valued is the best gift you can give.



The holidays can be a hard time for anyone, but this year is sure to present its own unique challenges. Having 24/7 access to virtual mental healthcare and primary care for the whole family can help. Set up your [Akira by TELUS Health](#) account today to make sure you have access to clinicians as soon as you need them.

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

(AND WHEN TO SEEK HELP)

By Dr. Diane McIntosh, BSc Pharmacy, MD, FRCPC,
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The word anxiety has figured prominently in the news since the start of the pandemic, however terms like anxiety and depression often mean something different for every individual. That's why, when a patient tells me they're experiencing anxiety, I commonly ask, "What does anxiety mean for you?"

All of us have experienced anxiety at times, whether before a big presentation or a job interview, or when we have to talk to someone about an uncomfortable topic. That occasional feeling is unpleasant and unsettling, but it's also pretty normal.

The challenge is to determine when anxiety is impacting usual functioning, whether at work, home or school, and whether it's severe enough that professional support would be beneficial.

Parents in particular are struggling with the concept of anxiety because it has become something of an epidemic among young people. In some cases, the term anxiety has become a catch-all for every unpleasant feeling. For other young people, their symptoms of anxiety are very severe, impacting their ability to attend school, find work or maintain relationships. Anxiety symptoms might also be a harbinger of another serious mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

I'll first define "pathological" anxiety then discuss why it's important to understand and quantify anxiety, and finally, suggest where you can look for help if you, or someone you love, is suffering from chronic, impairing anxiety.

The science of fear

Fear is a normal response to a real threat and it's critical for our safety. When our safety is threatened, our brain sets in motion a series of evasive measures, called the "fight or flight" response.

The "fear centre" of the brain is called the amygdala. When confronted by a threat, your brain sends sensory information, including what you see, hear, touch, taste and smell, to the amygdala. This information moves at lightning speed and the amygdala then directs the rest of your body to respond to the threat, to keep you safe.

For instance, when an aggressive dog is running toward you, snarling with its teeth bared, you see and hear the dog and that sensory information is sent to your amygdala, which causes an increase in your heart rate and blood pressure. Blood is rapidly directed away from less necessary organs and toward body parts necessary to help you to run away, scream or pick up a stick to protect yourself. This is a normal reaction to an obvious threat.

There are different types of anxiety

Those who have pathological or abnormal anxiety experience fear that is excessive, unwarranted, inappropriate and impairing. Rather than reacting to a threat that is obvious, like a charging dog, pathological anxiety is a response to threats that are vague, uncertain and sometimes, unknown. For instance, people experiencing generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) worry excessively about everyday issues, like health, finances or safety.

GAD is the "what if..." kind of anxiety. A person living with GAD might worry, "What if my partner gets sick and we can't pay the mortgage," even though their partner is perfectly well and their family is financially stable. Occasionally having these kinds of worries is not unusual, especially if there's a good reason underlying the concern, which may lead to rumination and poor sleep. However, those living with GAD can't stop worrying, the worry is often not rooted in facts, and the thoughts take over their life, impacting their sleep, relationships and ability to function fully at work and at home. My patients with GAD know their anxiety is excessive and unwarranted. They tell me, "I know my worrying is over the top" or "I can't understand why I keep worrying about this," but they can't stop worrying. Sadly, they also worry about the potential negative impact of their constant worrying. They know it's not good for them to be worried all the time and it's also causing problems at work and home, but they're concerned that if they stop worrying, the things they worry about will happen, so they need to keep thinking about those worries.

Typical anxiety symptoms include: feeling keyed up or tense, feeling unusually restless, difficulty concentrating because of worry, fear that something awful may happen, difficulty sleeping due to worry and feeling like you might lose control. Anxiety symptoms can occur on their own but they also occur

frequently in association with other mental illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder, or ADHD. Research demonstrates that the presence of anxiety symptoms may significantly increase the severity of the disorder, make the disorder more difficult to treat and heighten the risk of suicide.

Anxiety disorders are psychiatric diagnoses that include a collection of anxiety-related symptoms that commonly occur together. GAD is an anxiety disorder, as well as panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social anxiety disorder.

Chronic, pathological anxiety is not good for your brain. We know it can provoke an inflammatory process that can damage and even kill brain cells. It's possible to measure the structural and functional brain changes associated with severe, untreated, chronic anxiety. Chronicity also makes anxiety more difficult to treat and can lead to more severe associated cognitive symptoms and heightens the risk for depression and self-medication with alcohol, cannabis or other drugs.

When to seek help

How do you know whether you or your loved-one should seek professional help for anxiety or any mental illness? It's important to consider how severe the symptoms are (how difficult they are to live with), how much the anxiety is impairing functioning and how significantly anxiety is impacting quality of life.

If the symptoms of anxiety are present for most of the day, nearly every day; if the symptoms are getting in the way of working effectively, being social or maintaining your relationships; and if they're causing misery, professional help would likely be beneficial. Talk therapy, especially cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), has a great deal of evidence demonstrating its benefits for overcoming anxiety.

Antidepressant medications are used to treat anxiety and can be life saving treatments for severe anxiety. Whatever kind of help you're seeking, the best place to start is by speaking to a family doctor or nurse practitioner about your concerns. They're best to assess your symptoms, make a diagnosis and guide your next steps.

If you're thinking, "My anxiety isn't that bad, but I know it's a problem," you'd still likely benefit from some support (CBT can be helpful for less severe anxiety). Additionally, mindfulness meditation, exercise and good sleep hygiene can have a positive impact on anxiety.

Many of my patients initially believed that anxiety was their cross to bear, but I can assure you that even the most severe anxiety can get much better. If treated early and fully, it can completely resolve. The best advice I can offer is to ask for help, and if you don't get the help you need or don't feel heard, ask someone else. There is always a path ahead.

Dr. McIntosh played a pivotal role in developing Ontario's new Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence, the foundation on which the province will build a comprehensive and connected mental health and addictions system. The Mental Health and Addictions Centre of Excellence will, for the first time in Ontario's history, drive the broad, systemic transformation necessary to enable significant improvements to the quality and availability of services. [Learn more here.](#)



MANAGING SEASONAL ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION



While we won't be attending many cocktail parties this December, some Canadians will still feel inclined to over-indulge in cocktails at home. In fact, 25% of Canadians aged 35-54 are drinking more during the COVID-19 pandemic than before it, according to the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA). Unsurprisingly, the CCSA found that the main factors responsible for our uptick in alcohol consumption are lack of a regular schedule (51%), stress (44%), loneliness (19%) and boredom (49%).

Since the holiday season typically sees Canadians imbibing a little bit more than usual in "regular" years, let's be especially mindful of managing our drinking this holiday season. Here are some important factors to consider:

Alcohol and COVID-19

Alcohol has short and long-term effects on almost every single organ in the body. "Overall, evidence suggests that there is no "safe limit" when it comes to drinking; the risk of damage to our health increases with each drink we consume," says Medisys physician Dr. Vanessa Beliveau. Even in small quantities, alcohol use is known to increase cancer risk and weaken the immune system – a factor we should all consider during the "double wave" of COVID-19 and the annual flu season, she notes.

Remember that alcohol impairs our judgement and our decision-making processes too, so it can become more difficult to make smart decisions about physical distancing, self-isolation, hand hygiene and social boundaries when we drink. On the other hand, staying sober will help us remain vigilant about safety and likely lead to smarter decisions for ourselves, our family, and our communities. Teenagers and young adults can be particularly vulnerable when it comes to drinking and COVID-19, since this age group is often more social and experimental by nature. It's important to have a discussion about the heightened risks associated with drinking during this time in our lives with anyone in your bubble who may be at risk.

It's OK to enjoy an alcoholic beverage or two now and then, but keep these tips in mind to help minimize your consumption this holiday season and year-round:

1) Don't stockpile alcohol.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a tendency to buy more of everything we thought we might "need" in case we couldn't find it later. Doing this with alcohol may increase the amount you drink, simply by having it easily accessible.

2) Plan ahead.

If you anticipate that you will want to enjoy a drink with a certain meal or gathering with your bubble, planning what that drink will be and when you will have it ahead of time may lead to less consumption overall.

3) Prioritize nutrition and exercise.

Eating well and exercising regularly not only reduces stress, promotes good-feeling emotions and strengthens the immune system, but it can also help us feel more connected to our health and well-being. As a result we may feel more committed to avoiding alcohol and choosing healthier ways to unwind and relax.

4) Make a list of other stress-busters.

Many of us turn to alcohol to reduce stress. By making a short list of other stress-busting activities and keeping it handy in your wallet or saved on your phone, you can turn to it when you feel the urge to reach for a drink. Some stress-reducing activities may include a yoga practice or meditation, cooking or baking, calling a friend or doing a workout.

5) Seek help when you need it.

As a nation we are still in the midst of a stressful season of life, so if you're feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or using unhealthy habits to cope, know that you're not alone. Professional, confidential support is at your fingertips with **Akira by TELUS Health**. Activate your account now and connect with a clinician right away.



A photograph of three children sledding down a snowy hill. The child in the foreground is wearing a bright blue jacket and a blue and yellow striped hat, sitting in a wooden sled. Two other children are behind them, also wearing winter gear and smiling. The background is a soft, out-of-focus snowy landscape.

5 FESTIVE ACTIVITIES TO TRY WITH YOUR BUBBLE

While each province and territory will have its own guidelines surrounding gathering sizes as the festive season approaches, there's a good chance that you'll be spending even more time with your "bubble" during your holidays. But that doesn't have to mean Netflix and takeout instead of holiday cheer.

Here are five festive activities to try with your bubble this year:

1) Go tobogganing.

Whether you have young kids or not, dust off your old toboggan or pick up a couple of "magic carpet" style sleds from your local dollar store and head to a nearby hill for some fresh air and guaranteed laughter. Just remember to wear a mask to protect others and head to a different hill if it's too busy to maintain physical distancing with other groups.

2) Host a contactless charity drive.

Charities who rely on volunteers have been hard-hit during the pandemic, but with a little bit of creativity, your bubble can make a big difference for those in need by organizing a contactless drive. Call up a local shelter, food bank, or children's foundation and see what kind of goods they are in need of this year, then use your address book or social media network to rally your contacts and gather new items to donate. Whether it's non-perishable food items, new clothing or gift cards, simply arrange to pick up items from those willing to donate by having them leave a bag or box outside for you. Don't forget to snap a picture of everything you've gathered before dropping off your donation so you can share it with everyone who helped!

3) Decorate, decorate, decorate.

Don't be tempted to keep your holiday decorations boxed up this year just because you won't be hosting your annual party, family reunion or Secret Santa exchange. Even if you live alone, giving your surroundings a festive touch will help you remember that the season's spirit can't be cancelled. Splurge on a scented candle, make a huge popcorn garland to add to your tree or banister or go crazy with the twinkle lights. There is much to celebrate this year – like your loved ones, your health and your resilience.

4) Cook for a crowd – then freeze it for later.

You likely won't need to cook for a large crowd this year, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't cook in large quantities. If you enjoy the tradition of preparing a large, festive meal, or baking dozens of cookies, do it anyway – then freeze leftovers in batches to enjoy in the weeks and months to come.

5) Start a new tradition.

The coming weeks may bring feelings of disappointment about holiday traditions that just won't happen in 2020, but there may also be an opportunity to start a new seasonal ritual with your immediate family or a friend you've "bubbled up" with. A Mexican-themed Christmas day? A movie marathon on New Year's Eve? Nothing is off the table, as long as it's safe and brings you and your bubble joy. Remember that traditions had to start somewhere, and this is a rare opportunity to get to decide on a new one.



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TELUS limited edition face masks.



Shop our new collection of limited edition face masks. All proceeds go to the TELUS Friendly Future Foundation to support COVID-19 relief efforts.

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HEALTHIER HOMEMADE EGGNOG

Holiday treats are notoriously high in calories, fat and sugar, but we've got a way to enjoy a classic holiday drink with no refined sugar, fewer calories and fat – and a nutritional boost. Try this delicious, alcohol-free take on traditional eggnog. It preserves all the great flavour and holiday cheer of the traditional version!

Serves 4

Ingredients:

- 2 cups milk (cow's milk, almond milk, cashew milk, coconut milk or mixed dairy and non-dairy milks to taste)
- 3 egg whites + 1 egg yolk
- 1 ripe banana or 3 pitted medjool dates
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp vanilla extract (or the contents of one vanilla bean)
- 1/4 tsp ground cloves (optional)

Directions:

1. Place all ingredients into a food processor or blender until smooth (or blend in a pot using a hand blender).
2. Pour mixture into a pot and very gently simmer for about 15 minutes, whisking often (do not boil).
3. Allow mixture to cool and then chill in refrigerator overnight.
4. Serve in cups or mason jars and sprinkle with extra cinnamon before serving.
5. Garnish with star anise or cinnamon sticks.



Wondering how to make
healthy food choices
while enjoying the
holiday season?

Our registered dietitians
offer virtual consultations,
at your convenience.
[Click here](#) to learn more.

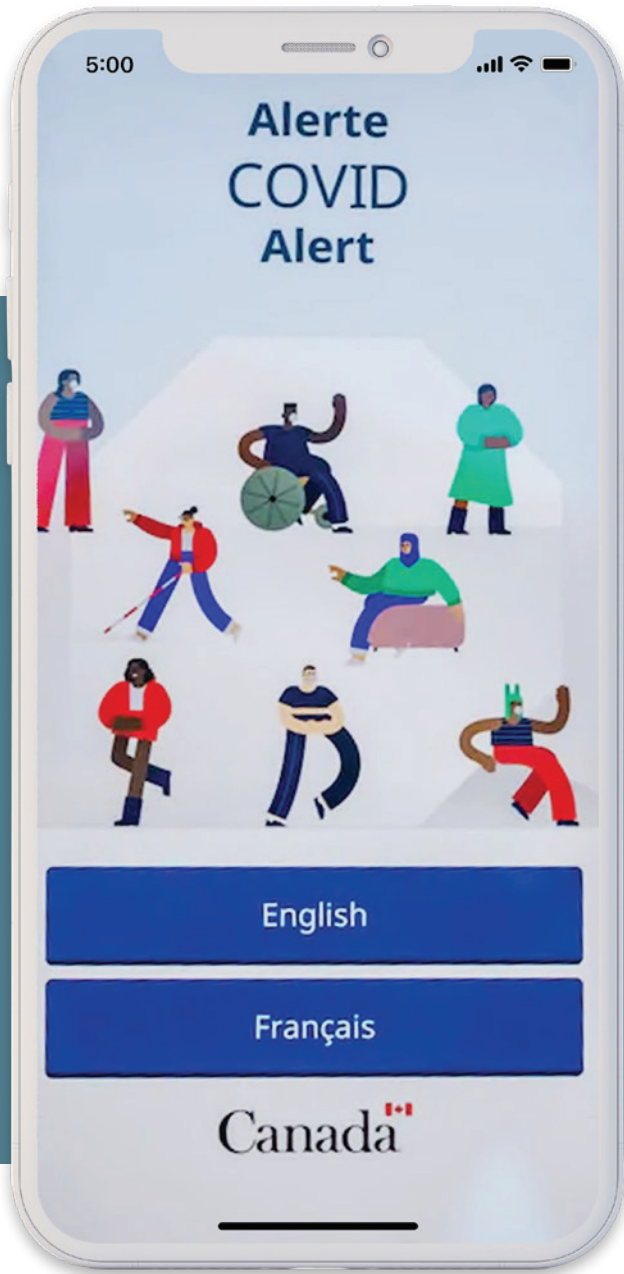
Making health a priority is more important now than ever.

Give the gift of health this holiday season
with a Preventive Health Assessment.



Note: Preferred corporate rates are often extended to spouses and immediate family members.*
In some cases, spouses are covered in part or in full by corporate plans.

[Click here](#) to learn more or to book an appointment.



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Together, let's limit the spread of COVID-19 and prevent future outbreaks.

As part of our commitment to keeping our customers, team, and communities safe and connected during this difficult time, Medisys supported by TELUS Health is supporting the Government of Canada in its efforts to encourage all Canadians to download and use the new COVID Alert notification app.

"The COVID Alert app will aid the pandemic response effort significantly if enough people have it. It's an easy way we can all help protect ourselves, our loved ones and our communities."

– Dr. Dominik Nowak, Chair and Physician Lead, TELUS Medical Advisory Council

Download the COVID Alert app today, and tell your friend and family



Note: The app is currently available in all provinces except British Columbia and Alberta. It is not available in the territories, but downloading it now will ensure you are ready when the app does become available.