

LGBT and Family During the Holidays

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This time of year is full of nostalgic sights, sounds, & smells. At every turn there are windows filled with decorations, holiday songs pumping through the speakers, even a myriad of holiday flavored coffees in red & green cups. We want to think of this season as magical & joyful, but for many LGBTQ+ individuals, there can be a lot of anxiety and anticipation around seeing family for the holidays. It is not uncommon for shame to be associated with family during the holidays.

Multiple studies have shown that LGBTQ+ individuals have higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse due to negative experiences around coming out, verbal & physical harassment, and isolation. During the holidays, emotional challenges can be magnified, especially when anticipating family gatherings. Even when family and friends are accepting, past emotional history, trauma, and the need to lessen or hide your true self can be persistent.

Having a self care plan can be a good way to prepare for the challenges that come with the holiday season.

1. Boundaries

Try to set limits with yourself and others. Remember that you always have a choice. Sometimes it can feel like the holidays are full of obligations but you can always politely and firmly decline. If you choose to visit family, set clear boundaries. For instance, having your own place to stay can be a way to create comfort and safety for yourself. This way if you feel uncomfortable or need a break you have a separate space to go. You can always choose to stay with a friend, loved one, or in a hotel. If tensions arise or you feel emotionally escalated, take a time out. Step outside, take a deep breath, go for a drive. Offer to walk the dog, run to the store for a forgotten item. Whatever you need to get calm and take care of yourself.

2. Acceptance

Try to manage your expectations. You can bring acceptance to the table by remembering things are not perfect, nor do they have to be. You can only control your own behavior. Try to avoid heated arguments or debates, they rarely lead anywhere productive, instead attempt to let go and accept the situation as it is, even if it's not ideal.

3. Compassion & Gratitude

Try to cultivate compassion by remembering that some of the family problems and attitudes you are now facing may have been going on for generations, and this may help you gain some perspective and diminish blame. This is the family you have been given, so try to find ways to understand and accept them while maintaining your own integrity. They may not be offering you the kind of acceptance you desire, but modeling acceptance can be a great step in showing them how to embrace differences. Even if things don't go according to plan, finding gratitude in even the smallest things, can serve your own well-being. To keep things in perspective, try considering 1 or 2 moments you are thankful for at the end of each day.

Holiday events and celebrations often involve alcohol. Remember that conversations and debates can get more emotionally charged when people are drinking. Try to be responsible with consuming alcohol and keep in mind that others may say inappropriate things when drinking. If you are able to stay clear headed it will be easier to take care of yourself and avoid getting pulled into an unproductive, possibly hurtful, alcohol driven debate.

– Austin Family Counseling