



Tips for 2SLGBTQIA+ Communities This Holiday Season

When you have cancer and identify as 2SLGBTQIA+(Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual), the holiday season can feel like a challenge. It may not look quite like the images we see on TV or holiday greeting cards!

Whether you celebrate Hanukkah, Winter Solstice, Christmas, Kwanzaa, or Khushyali, this time of year can be demanding. It can bring up many mixed emotions and leave you feeling drained.

Many 2SLGBTQIA+ cancer patients deal with unique stress during the holidays.

Some people may plan to come “out” to family (reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity). Others may be planning to introduce a new partner or to tell family that they are transitioning (expressing a different gender to match the gender they feel inside, or no gender).

Some people may not be welcome to visit the family they are born or adopted into, their family of origin. Others may not have their loved ones here in Canada. Some people may be planning to tell their families and friends about their cancer for the first time.

Going home for the holidays may mean going into a harmful environment where you cannot be your true self or be accepted by loved ones. This can create anxiety when there is no family support. Some may feel very alone and have a sense of not belonging. This can be extra devastating and hurtful when you are dealing with cancer and needing support.

These events can make the holidays extra stressful and hard.

- You may not be “out” to everyone who you will spend time with during the holiday season. You may not be “out” to others about your cancer.
- You may be “out”, but not fully accepted by everyone. You may feel subtle pressure to not mention or discuss your sexual orientation or gender identity. This pressure may be in the form of awkward silences, or hurtful jokes and comments.
- Your partner may not be “out” to their family, or their family may not welcome you to celebrate the holidays with them.
- You may be invited to a holiday family gathering but told that you and your partner cannot share a bedroom. You may be asked to follow a dress code that does not align with your gender identity.
- Families may misgender you, call you by a name that you no longer use or subject you to prying questions about your sexuality and/or gender identity.
- You may be made to feel invisible and not accepted, even after coming out.
- You may be rejected by your family of origin and have no one to spend the holidays with.

Microaggressions

During the holidays, 2SLGBTQIA+ people may face, not just direct insults, but microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle comments or actions that are hostile toward a group of people. They are based on things such as race, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, and sexual orientation. Microaggressions can be verbal or nonverbal.

Microaggressions are subtle, but harmful. An example is being introduced as “my trans cousin”, rather than as simply a cousin. Another example could be a comment like “no kissing under the mistle tow in front of the kids”. These kinds of comments can make you feel disrespected.

Navigating traditional family customs

Traditions or customs that a family does every year, can take on a new challenge. For example, attending a religious service on Christmas eve might be a unique challenge. If you are no longer welcome at your place of worship, you may experience feelings of sadness and loss. People may not acknowledge your feelings of being excluded.

Adding Cancer to the holidays

Having cancer can add an extra level of discomfort to the holidays. People may want to give you unwanted medical advice or tell you unhelpful stories about someone else's cancer journey. Some people might even make comments about sexual orientation being the cause of cancer, such as: "yes I've heard that lots of gay men get that cancer".

For some people, their families or friends may not even mention their cancer or ask how they are doing. Having your cancer diagnosis ignored can add to feelings of not being seen. This may be extra hard because you may already feel unseen due to your sexual orientation and gender identity.

Whether you choose to spend your holidays with your family of origin or your family of choice, here are some ways to help you get through the holidays

1. You Are Allowed to Decide If and How You Want to Celebrate the holidays.

Feelings of duty and guilt often affect our choices. Maybe you want to skip the holidays because cancer treatment is leaving you tired. Maybe you just do not have the energy to deal with your family of origin this year. Or you may have concerns about Covid-19. Whatever you decide to do is up to you, and it is okay.

2. Plan for handling a stressful event

Think about how you might react to a stressful situation. Consider ways you can respond and cope in those situations, for example, a homophobic (harmful beliefs about people who are not heterosexual) joke at the dinner table. Prepare and practice responses like "Please do not make jokes like that – they are hurtful and make me feel

unwelcome” Or “that is personal, and I would rather not discuss that”. These simple statements are hard to argue with. Set limits and be prepared for what you are willing and not willing to discuss.

3. Manage your expectations (what you hope for).

Give some thought to:

- what you will likely get out of your family visit
- what you are likely to expect
- how you will take care of yourself.

Think about what you do and do not have control over. Consider what you need to do to feel good about yourself, and what you can do to meet your needs. Permit yourself to leave if things get too intense. Do whatever you need to take care of yourself.

4. Spend time with chosen family

People may feel that spending time with families of origin is the only real or valid way to spend the holiday. This is not true. Make time to celebrate holidays with your chosen family, community, and those who love and support you. You can get together virtually even after holiday celebrations.

5. Create an affirmation

Use an affirming or helpful phrase to manage stressful moments. A simple mantra (sacred group of words) can help stop thoughts going back to the past. For example, say something like “I have the right to be me and do not need to change for anyone.” Say this in your mind or out loud as often as needed.”

6. Take Breaks

It is okay to leave for short periods and take some space for yourself. Go for a walk, a drive, go into another room and do some stretches and take some slow deep breaths. Make a playlist of music you love or call or text a friend.

7. Be aware of your anxiety or stress

When you can notice and name feelings of anxiety, it can help you manage this emotion and to be mindful. When stress is coming from memories of the past or worries about the future, focus on staying present, in the moment. Resist the urge to self-medicate (the misuse of drugs or alcohol to cope with mental or physical pain). For example, during the holidays there is often a lot of alcohol but drinking too much can worsen symptoms of depression

8. Keep it simple: coping with holiday stress and cancer

Many experts provide the following advice:

- Adapt and simplify holiday celebrations and activities.
- Take time to relax and rest.
- Ask for help if you need it.

Everyone deserves relaxation and joy over the holiday season. Whatever your plans, this is our wish to you! The SGDC Working Group extends our warmest Season’s Greetings to our patient communities and wish you and your loved ones all the best in 2022!

If you need help over the holidays:

	<p>Gerstein Crisis Centre Phone: 416 929 5200 https://gersteincentre.org/</p>
	<p>Trans Lifeline Phone: Canada 877 330 6366 https://translifeline.org</p>
	<p>LGBT Youthline Phone: 647 694 4275 https://www.youthline.ca</p>

Resources and sources we used in writing this article:

<https://www.hrc.org/news/six-things-to-remember-this-holiday-season-if-you-are-lgbtq>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/better/pop-culture/why-some-lgbtq-people-feel-especially-stressed-holidays-7-things-ncna950461>

<https://www.cancer.net/blog/2019-12/coping-with-holiday-stress-when-you-have-cancer>

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