

# STAY Tuned- Connection Over Perfection: Holidays & Navigating Social Stress

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**Gillian:** Welcome back to Stay Tuned, supporting Transition Aged Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute for Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm your co-host, Gillian,

**Mei:** I'm your co-host Mei. On today's episode, we are going to be taking some time to talk about how the holiday season is coming up.

Uh, and it can be pretty stressful. I wouldn't even say coming up, we're already in it.

**Gillian:** We're right in the middle.

**Mei:** Yeah. I mean, we've had Thanksgiving high of the storm. Yes. New Year's is right around the corner. So [00:01:00] that being said, we know it's a stressful time. It's winter, it gets dark real early around where we live at least.

Um, and that can be really tough, um, especially for those with mental health conditions. I know for myself, this is definitely a trickier time of year to get through. Um, and. Today the plan is to just talk through some coping strategies and, um, healthy outlets that can pull us away from that stress and anxiety and some of those symptoms that might, um, intensify around this time.

And to see how community can actually be a really great source of strength, um, during this time as well.

**Gillian:** Yeah, let's definitely get into it because I know that I can use some help in this area. I love the holidays, but it is definitely [00:02:00] also stressful at the same time. Totally.

**Mei:** I am right there with you, Gillian.

Um, I know that not only is it the seasonal depression, that's tough, but there's just a lot of expectations around this time of year, um, whether it's spending time with family or feeling left out or FOMO even fear of missing out. Um, because you don't necessarily talk to your family or you don't, um, have people you feel like you can go to or, um, you have trouble reaching out to friends.

It's, it's tough for so many reasons. Financial strain as well. There's a lot of expectation to be a part of different events, which would require money or gift giving. Um, that can be really anxiety inducing.

**Gillian:** It really can.

**Mei:** So [00:03:00] yeah. With that being said, um, I think we're gonna take today to walk through some areas that, um, hopefully might be helpful, um, in order to get through again, what's sort of a trickier time for many of us. Um, and take what you need. And leave what doesn't feel applicable to you?

**Gillian:** So one thing that comes up for me a lot are boundaries. And over time I've learned how helpful it can be to set boundaries, but I also recognize how challenging it can be. Um, so we thought we'd just chat a little about that.

**Mei:** About that. Yeah. I think that.

It's tough. It can be tough if you're not used to setting boundaries with people. Um, especially like if you're a people pleaser, it's really [00:04:00] challenging speaking up for yourself.

But it can be tough not only managing your anxiety around setting boundaries, but also managing the other person's reaction as well.

**Gillian:** Yeah. And it's challenging. I mean, we can't control another person's reaction. But I know around this time of year I'll get so busy and I'll try to go to as many events as I can and keep up with everything, but I can't do everything.

Yeah. And I can't do it all. So. I feel really badly when I have to cancel and sometimes somewhat irrationally I'll think, you know, maybe they're gonna take it the wrong way or I won't get invited again. Um, I know one thing that I found helpful is just explaining to the person what's going on, and people have been really [00:05:00] receptive to that.

Um, and that's helped with a lot of my relationships. And honestly, it's also helped the other person because they see like, oh, hey, this is actually something that maybe I should try too in my life. Hmm. Yeah, being a role model.

**Mei:** Yeah, I was just about to say that. It's like you're a role model for those around you.

By being the person to set those boundaries and showing others, like, you don't have to be a yes man. You don't, just because people want you there doesn't mean, as nice as that feels, it doesn't mean you're obligated to go and, and show up. We all have different social batteries, we all have different resources we can give.

We all have our personal challenges and I think it's fair to, to be kind to ourselves about that and, and put yourself first. As a cliché as it sounds, it's cliché for a reason. [00:06:00] Um, but yeah, and I think like in terms of how you can set a boundary, I think it's helpful to, like you said, be honest if you're comfortable about what's going on, um.

I think vulnerability can go a long way and a script wouldn't be a bad idea either. Um, if that's something you feel like you need to do.

**Gillian:** Yeah. I actually did scripts for a long time. I, um, and I don't anymore, but I can say that they were so helpful.

**Mei:** Totally. And, um, sometimes, or when you're super anxious, it's hard to form thoughts. It's hard, it's hard to sound coherent and you forget things you wanted to say. Words get jumbled. So a script is definitely a really great way of making sure you get everything you wanna say [00:07:00] out there.

Um, because otherwise, yeah, anxiety can definitely take. Take control and, and sort of mess up your message that you wanted to get across.

**Gillian:** So one thing that I'm actually trying to figure out this week is the when I'm gonna take time off from work. And I think for myself that's important. So I still have time for self care and some relaxation, so I'm looking forward to that. And a little more time to spend with family and friends when they're in the area for the holidays will be nice.

**Mei:** Yeah. Yeah, I think taking time off work, even if you don't necessarily have big plans or, um, you know, plans to travel or plans to see people, I [00:08:00] think that's still a great use of time to sort of recharge. Um, again,

'cause this time of year can be so intense and, and obligations can pop out of everywhere. So it's nice to just take that time to slow down and, and do the things you you wanna do, um, and not just show up constantly for other people and other people's parties.

And, and it can all, it can all just feel like a lot and your time off your PTO is there for you to use. I think that's another important thing. I know it's really dependent on circumstance as well, because let's remember, not everyone has PTO to take off either. You might not be in a position to use that, and that's, that's okay too.

I think that's where boundary setting comes up again. And, boundary setting comes up again here, with family that may not be as understanding that you can't see them or you know, just [00:09:00] friends that are bummed out that you have to say no and decline an invitation.

I think being upfront that, hey, I just, I don't have the PTO to to do this or participate. Um, I have to put work first. You know? I think that's a very understandable reason.

**Gillian:** Yep. I completely agree. And always remember that resting is being productive. Like we all have to rest sometimes. Um, so like setting those boundaries, even if it is just so you can have a little bit time to rest, um, can be really important and helpful.

**Mei:** Totally.

And, um, I think another thing that comes up a lot, I mean, it comes up year round honestly, but the holiday season there is always the [00:10:00] expectation of gift giving and etiquette of like, well, they gave me a gift

does that mean I owe them a gift now? Or, you know, feeling just overstretched financially. It's, it's really anxiety, pro provoking and very stressful. And, um, I know for myself, I always love to give gifts. Like I, if I could give gifts more often, I would, I just can't sustain it financially. Um, but it's a big part of my love language and it feels really.

It feels bad to not be able to give, um, in the ways that I want to be able to give to my friends and family.

How do I cope with that? Not well. Instead I am financially irresponsible. Don't be like me.

**Gillian:** Um, that's so tough though, if that's your love language.

**Mei:** It's like, [00:11:00] my love language is definitely a mix of acts of service and gift giving. 'cause to me, acts of service can be a gift. So like, I love cooking for others, but in a way like that takes, that takes a financial, um, like I take a financial hit because I buy the ingredients and stuff but I, I wanna, I can, you know, get away with gifting in that way 'cause it's not as, as pricey as well, it can be pricey, but the goal is for it to not be as pricey as buying something at the store, you know?

**Gillian:** Um, okay. So another thing that I come across with gifts is when I can't afford to get someone a gift, but I also don't want to tell them my financial situation and navigating [00:12:00] that.

**Mei:** Totally. It's not something you owe people like I know. Yeah. And if you're not comfortable, you're not comfortable. But I, I totally understand. Like, it can be, it can be really, um. It can be sort of a loaded area for people to talk about. 'cause finances are such a huge source of stress for so many people.

And I think it can be, for me at least, I'll speak from my perspective. It's not something I like to think about because I know it's, it, it doesn't look good. It's not pretty. And it can be hard when there's people in your life who have so much more than you and painful. I think there is sort of a pain there as well, because like, unfortunately [00:13:00] I do compare myself and I, I wish I had it easier, but I, I'm in the situation I'm in and it's, it's tough to talk about.

It's tough to acknowledge and it's, it's vulnerable. Mm-hmm. Because then people make assumptions, you know?

**Gillian:** Yeah, and it's tough 'cause I wanna give them a gift too, right. So yeah, I mean, one thing that I've done is like more DIY gifts, so I've made different like lip balms and body butters and like sugar scrubs and they were actually pretty popular, so it was a I bet.

Why?

**Mei:** Yeah, no, people love homemade gifts. I feel like I would, I, again, it's so cliché, but I would so much rather receive something that someone puts so much love and thought into. I think that speaks [00:14:00] a lot more to how much that person cares, um, than if you just bought something off like Amazon or, you know.

Yeah. So, yeah, I mean, I think like everyone. I shouldn't speak in black or white. Many, many people are going to understand that it's really tough right now to get by and that gifts, um, gifts are definitely an extra thing that could add stress and I think anyone worth keeping around would understand that and be respectful of that and, um, be active to, to take the pressure off and say things like, you know, I got you something.

I don't expect anything from you like that. It's all good. [00:15:00] Like, but I just wanted to get you this thing. Or I made you a little something. And, um, even like having a conversation beforehand with your partner, with your family, your friends, like, we're not gonna do gifts or here's the budget. Those types of conversations I feel like can be really helpful too.

**Gillian:** I agree. I love the budget conversation. Like you can't get anything over this amount.

**Mei:** Yes. Yeah. That's super helpful.

**Gillian:** I feel like also, I don't know about you, but I'll get invited to go to the, like the Nutcracker or various shows and that can be expensive as well. Um, or people just wanting when they're in town and wanting to go for brunch and it all adds up. Um, especially when.

You might already be buying gifts that month as well. So you're [00:16:00] taking a hit from that too?

**Mei:** Yes. Yeah. It's not just the gift giving, it's all the social obligations that come around this time and, um, 'cause it's, it's cold out. No one wants to spend time at a free park or anything, so your only other options really, at least where I live, are like you said, go see a show, go to the movies, or go get dinner, brunch or drinks or something.

Um, and it's very, it can be very burdensome on the wallet. Yeah. Um, so I feel you there for sure. And I don't think there really is an easy way around it, apart from saying like, sorry, I'm gonna have to skip. I've already, you know, I, I, I have other things I, I need to spend money on this month or, you know, even.

You don't have to give a reason, you can just say no. Um, I wish I could come, but I have something else to do. Yeah. [00:17:00] Ugh. But I get it.

**Gillian:** Yeah, I know. So my friend recently asked me to go to something, but I couldn't afford it. And so she kept asking and I was like, oh, no thank you. I

can't. And eventually I had to just be like, it's just too expensive for right now. Um, but then I threw out some, um, cheaper and some free events that were going on, and so we ended up doing that instead.

And they were a lot of fun.

**Mei:** Yeah, I was actually just about to say as well, like if you, like, sometimes if a friend comes to you wanting to do a pricier activity that's out of your budget and you decline, it's, it, I I feel like you still deserve to socialize. You still deserve to go out and do fun things, so maybe it's a matter of suggesting something cheaper or, um, inviting them over and like cooking dinner at home [00:18:00] together and you like split the cost of the groceries or something.

I know that's like what I do in my, my personal life as well. But like, finding an alternative I think is really important because you shouldn't have to miss out on like connecting with friends just because there's a high barrier to entry entry for certain activities you may wanna do. Like just, I think it just takes a bit of flexibility and creative thinking.

**Gillian:** Yeah. And it also shows the friend that you are really interested in hanging out.

**Mei:** Yeah, that's a good point. Yeah.

And this reminds me of, um, our third spaces conversation we were having a little while ago, which I know we wanna dedicate an episode two, but I'll briefly touch on how this just very much is evident evidence that like, we need more third spaces, [00:19:00] accessible places where people can go to connect and socialize, um, without having to spend that much money, you know?

Yeah. Can

**Gillian:** we

**Mei:** start the

**Gillian:** task force to get this going? Please

**Mei:** Would love.



Yeah. Um, and then speaking of spaces, I think finding safe spaces during this time of year is also really important. Um, whether that safe space is a physical space, an online space, or, um, like, how do I phrase this? The space you create when you're with a specific person who makes you feel safe. That was a really convoluted way of saying a safe person.

It.

But yeah, I guess like [00:20:00] there will be event or during this time of year, I'm sure events will pop up. That whether it's, you know, going back to your childhood home that is kind of tough for you or just being in whatever place it is that brings up hard emotions. Um. It's important to also label some places that you do feel good in and to make sure you have adequate time in those spaces as well.

I don't know if you have anything that you typically go to Jillian.

**Gillian:** Um, so for an external space, there's this one park near me, um, and I've just designated as my safe space. And honestly, if I have to make a really hard phone call, even I will drive there and then make the call, call in my car. Um, [00:21:00] so I, I don't know, I just love it there.

And then in general, like. Kinda a mobile safe space that I like. Um, I'm often wearing earbuds that have active noise cancellation, um, or nor no noise. I am often wearing active noise canceling headphones or noise reducing earplugs. 'cause I have, um, sensory sensitivities. So I have found that to be so helpful, especially for kind of like feelings of anxiety, um, and anything heated.

It just calms me down instantly. I love it. But what about you?

**Mei:** Yeah, I can really, uh, I relate a lot to what you said, actually, safe spaces. [00:22:00] Just having those, um. Those. Yeah. Whatever it is, a park, I have a park near me that I, I'm convinced nothing bad could ever happen there. Or just even like my couch, I love my couch so much, it's the second I lay in it, I get my heat pad going.

Like, we're good. Everything's gonna be okay. Um, but it's those positive associations you make with certain places or things that can be really helpful. And maybe there is that call that you've been putting off or something difficult you're going through and you just need that extra bit of comfort to get you through it.



Why not use it, you know? Yeah. Yeah. Um, there's, there's definitely a lot of, a lot of, um, comfort that can be found in having safe spaces identified and utilizing them when, when you can is, is really [00:23:00] beneficial.

**Gillian:** Yeah. And to quickly add that, you know, it could even just be. Not just, but it could be a virtual meetup or, you know, a smaller get together and also flexible participation.

**Mei:** Yeah, that's a really good point. Like maybe, maybe there is an event and it is giving you a lot of anxiety to be there. Or there's, there's some other reason mental health related that you, you feel like you can't go but you wanna go.

Um, maybe it's a matter of just stepping in for like 20 minutes, making an appearance and then leaving and honoring when things become too much for you. Um, but I think like there's a line there to be walked with avoidance. Yeah. Versus, versus genuinely feeling like you don't wanna go. I think when, [00:24:00] when you get to the point where it's like, I wanna go, but something mental health wise is holding me back.

You, you might be walking the line of, of avoiding it.

**Gillian:** Yeah. No, that's so true. I know for myself, like I'll tell myself I'm only gonna go to something for a limited amount of time, but I also recognize that I'm someone that, once I get there, I don't leave.

So I think it must also depend on the person.

**Mei:** Yeah. I, you can almost like, trick yourself and say like, like I, I think bottom line, maybe give yourself, set yourself a number, like a set amount of time. I wanna stay for this amount. If it is an event you generally want to go to.

**Gillian:** Mm-hmm.

**Mei:** And then if it gets to that point and you're like, I'm having a good time, you don't wanna leave, honor that.

Like, stay, you know. But if you're like, okay, it's getting to be too much, then, [00:25:00] you know, of course you are an individual with autonomy, like leave. Yep.

**Gillian:** Do what's best for you,

**Mei:** do what's best for you. Exactly. I just bring up like avoidance because I know that it, it's come up in my life. It's definitely come up in peers' lives. Um, and you can sort of, you can sort of trick yourself sometimes that you're doing what's best for you and you're putting yourself first when in reality you are encouraging unhealthy habits.

Yeah.

**Gillian:** Isolating can make things a lot harder.

**Mei:** Mm-hmm. It's like in, in that moment, it might feel comforting and helpful in that moment to isolate and, um, avoid whatever it is, but bigger, picture wise, [00:26:00] I guess what I do is I, I think about what I want my life to look like more broadly, um, or in a big, bigger picture sense.

Do I want to be sociable? Do I wanna have friends? Do I wanna feel connected? And yeah, for me, those, the answers are yes to all those, to all those questions. And so what actions support those goals? A lot of the time it's not isolating.

**Gillian:** Yeah. You described that so well,

**Mei:** thank you.

I appreciate that. I mean, it's definitely been one of my core issues because, I mean, well, I have agoraphobia, so like, uh, a lot of my time is spent avoiding the outside world and, or it used to be, I should say I'm a lot better now.

Um, but yeah, I, I've spent so much time avoiding and telling myself that I'm safe if I stay [00:27:00] inside. Um. It's, it's what I need to do for my mental health. I can't go out, I can't be like the other 20 something year olds. I just, it's, I'm my mental health. I, I can't cope with that.

And that was definitely a false narrative I was telling myself, um, because it just felt unsafe. And something I needed to learn was that just because something feels unsafe doesn't mean it is unsafe. For me, my brain is not to be trusted. That's why I have a condition. Like maybe if I didn't have a condition like agoraphobia, yeah, I could trust my, my takes.

But unfortunately, if my brain is telling me something is unsafe, I should think a little critically about it, you know?

**Gillian:** Self-awareness is key here.

**Mei:** Key. Exactly. Like that's, you know yourself best. Yeah. Um, and when you're [00:28:00] ready to evaluate, like where, if you are happy with how things are for you, um, and evaluate like if you're okay with your patterns that you've fallen into, I encourage you to think about, you know, if you're doing what's good for you or not.

I know I wasn't and I still struggle.

**Gillian:** Yeah. It's an ongoing struggle. I'm sure.

**Mei:** Totally sure is.

Well, so we've talked about safe spaces. Another thing that could be helpful during this time is literally just building your own traditions as well. If, for whatever reason you don't speak to your family or family is tough for you, whatever, um, having your own traditions to look forward to I think can be really [00:29:00] helpful, uh, during this time to sort of move away and, and de-center family from this time of year? If again, that's tough for you. I know for myself, um, Thanksgiving has already passed, but every year my college friends put on a Friendsgiving and it definitely takes a lot of the pressure off from my family. Thanksgiving going perfectly. It sort of, how do I wanna say this? Yeah. It sort of just ticks off the pressure, um, of my family Thanksgiving going perfectly because I know that I have Friendsgiving where that's consistently a safe space for me and um, it's just nice to have that, you know, and it's definitely become a tradition over the years.

**Gillian:** That's really great. Yeah. I do Friendsgiving as well, and I find it so helpful. And it's [00:30:00] just a really good opportunity to see everyone again and get together.

**Mei:** Yeah. And another nice thing about it is bring it back to the financial piece. It's relatively, um, relatively cheap to participate in because usually it's like a potluck or something, and you're not like necessarily going out to a dinner.

Um, it can be hosted at anyone's house.

**Gillian:** So true. Yeah. I'm also thinking, so for myself, I used to struggle with holidays a bit, um, and now I've kind of recreated, I guess both traditions, but how I remember Christmas, um, in more of a positive outlook. Um. And now I love the holiday [00:31:00] season. Um, one, the, some of the stuff I love to do is to go to like the holiday markets and those are free.

Um, so meet up with friends or partner. What else? Um, going to see my nieces and nephews and like their holiday concerts. Those are a ton of fun. They are very early in the morning, but they are worth it. Um, I like Christmas Eve, all these stay over my brother's house and it's really nice because the kids and they're all excited about Santa and opening the gifts and so it's just a really fun experience.

And yeah, I love to take pictures and look back on them and just think about the positive memories, um, because that's what I wanna focus on.

**Mei:** Yeah, being really intentional and mindful about what you choose to take away from your [00:32:00] experiences, I think is another good thing to keep in mind. Like, I think a lot of times the bad can overshadow really easily everything that's happened, but um, taking a second to be appreciative and relish in some of those positive, heartwarming moments that do pop up during the holidays is also really nice.

Yeah, so I mean, we just went through a bunch of different strategies and shared a little bit of our lived experiences around how we get through this season.

We know it's hard. I, I'm right there with you, whoever is listening to this, I am right there with you. Um, but hopefully some of the strategies we shared can inspire you to connect um, connect with people more who might be able to help you through whatever you're going through. Um, and I hope that you're inspired [00:33:00] to, you know, pick up some of these strategies.

I think we've talked a lot about resources and different ways that people, um, with family and supports, can use certain strategies to cope and get through this tricky period of time. Yeah. I don't, we haven't really addressed people who may not have family to lean back on or, um, people in their life, um, to go to during this time either.

And we definitely want to make sure that they know, they, they know we're thinking of them and that, even if you are isolated from family and friends, that there are definitely resources and options out there for you to get connected and find safe spaces and supports for you. [00:34:00] I think, um, we were talking earlier about, um, online resources. That's a big one.

Um, the Reddit community, I'm sure there's, for whatever interest you have, there are people out there who also have that interest. Yeah. Um, volunteering is huge and finding like-minded individuals when you're there volunteering. Um, and then another thing is. Maybe it's a matter of being vulnerable with those

around you who you do meet, um, and telling them what your situation is because I think people really do wanna help at the end of the day and do wanna be there for, um, someone who might be able to really use the extra support and, and love and care.

**Gillian:** It can feel really isolating. Um, but like you said, you are not alone and [00:35:00] there's other people going through similar things and can say from experience that it does get better and connect if you can and try to have the happiest of holidays.

**Mei:** With that being said, um, I hope that this episode was helpful, that there is at least something that you can take with you if it's not an actual hard skill. Maybe it was something we said that you related to and made you feel less alone.

**Gillian:** Whether you celebrate or not. We hope you have a great holiday season and we'll see you next time.

**Mei:** Sounds good to me. We'll see you next time. Thanks for listening. If you would like to contact us, you can email us at [stay\\_tuned@umassmed.edu](mailto:stay_tuned@umassmed.edu) and [00:36:00] check out the Transitions ACR website at [Umassmed.edu/transitionsACR](http://Umassmed.edu/transitionsACR), thanks for being here and be sure to stay tuned for next time.