First Choice Health®

Employee Assistance Program (FCH EAP)



Leaning Into Connection: How to Navigate Seasonal Gatherings

Katie Best, LCSW | Director of Client Services EAP

Earlier and earlier each year, we begin to see commercial and cultural representations of how we "should" be celebrating this time of year. Movies and advertisements paint a picture of flawless, joyful gatherings: smiling families gathered around glowing tables, children who never cry, and adults who magically agree on everything. When there is conflict, there is always a happy ending.

Real Life Isn't A Commercial
Real families are wonderfully messy, complicated, and sometimes exhausting. For many of us, this time of year means reuniting with relatives we haven't seen in months. While seeing family can remind us how deeply we care for one another, it can also bring up old stress, unresolved tension, or lingering grief. Balancing work, personal responsibilities, and obligations is complicated and hectic. When you add the pressure of trying to reconnect and do all the fun things in just a few days, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and irritated.

While we cannot eliminate stress entirely, we can change how we respond to it.
Here are some tips for taking care of yourself and lean into connection this season:

1. Keep Expectations Realistic
Try to move away from aiming for an "Instagram-perfect" celebration. Focus on creating meaningful, authentic moments together rather than flawless ones. A little imperfection is what makes your family uniquely yours.

2. Shift Control Where You Can
While you cannot control how family members act or speak, you always retain agency over your own time and choices. If certain days or gatherings feel like too much, look at where you can adjust your schedule or set gentle limits to protect your energy.

3. Guide the Conversation
Disagreement is normal and healthy. Just be sure to have your list of safe topics ready to pivot the conversation if needed. If dinner table discussions start heating up or steering into uncomfortable territory, gently direct the conversation toward shared joys—such as hobbies, family milestones, or favorite memories.

4. Give yourself Time to Transition
Give yourself a transition moment before walking into a family gathering. Take five minutes in the car to pause, practice slow deep breathing, or set an intention for how you want to show up.

5. Avoid Overpacking the Schedule
Trying to attend every event or visit every household leads to burnout for both kids and adults. Keep daily routines in mind, give yourself permission to say "no" to non-essential invitations, and alternate visits across different gatherings if needed.

6. Take Quick Breaks for Yourself
Stepping away for a quick walk, reading a chapter of a book in a quiet room, or taking 10 minutes to clear your mind and breathe deeply can completely reset your nervous system. Taking alone time isn't selfish—it helps you show up more fully when you are with others.

7. Show Appreciation
Take a moment to tell your loved ones that you value them. Expressing genuine gratitude to others doesn't just brighten their day—research shows it actively lowers your own stress levels, too.

Whether you're navigating family relationships, grief, or financial stress, FCH EAP supports you—so you can protect your peace of mind and focus on what matters most. You don't have to figure everything out on your own, FCH EAP can help with:

- **Short-Term Counseling Referrals:** Confidential support with licensed therapists to help you set boundaries, manage stress, and work through relationship dynamics.
- **Resource Service Referrals:** Assistance finding local eldercare, childcare, financial planning, or community support resources so you can save time and energy.
- **Coping Strategies:** Practical guidance and mindfulness resources to help you stay grounded through life's busier seasons.

FCH EAP | Call us at 800-777-4114

If you or someone you know needs the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, call or text 988 or use the chat function online at 988lifeline.org.