

Navigating Social Events Around the Holidays:

A Guide for Caregivers, Friends and Family of those with Post-Traumatic Stress and Social Anxiety



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The holiday season can be stressful for anyone. For veterans and families dealing with post-traumatic stress, TBI, or anxiety, and symptoms of hyper-arousal related to service, navigating the gauntlet of social events during the holidays can be incredibly difficult. Whether you are attending an event at the home of a friend, or hosting an event for family at your own home, there are several tips and strategies that can help your family cope with new social settings and avoid triggering agonizing symptoms for your veteran.

** If you are hosting or attending an event with a veteran or service member dealing with anxiety in social settings, understand that while they love spending time with family and friends around the holiday season like everyone else, large crowds can make them feel like they are constantly on edge, and elicit incredibly distressing feelings of being trapped or out of control. Know where veterans, caregivers, and families are coming from. These tips can show you ways to accommodate loved ones and friends around the holiday season, and ensure everyone is able to enjoy their time together with limited discomfort.

Hosting an Event at Your Home

Hosting an event at your house has advantages and drawbacks over attending an event elsewhere. The environment is familiar, more predictable, and the event is more within your control. However, it can be harder to deal with triggering guests or behaviors, because you can't simply leave your own house if it becomes overwhelming. With a bit of planning and communication with guests, you can ensure the event causes the least amount of stress and does not lead to the often debilitating symptoms of hyper-arousal.

Plan Ahead for Known Challenges

We try to keep our social circle small as it is, so that helps when inviting people over. Trust your gut on how many guests is “too many,” and who you and your veteran are most comfortable inviting to your home. If this is one of your first times hosting during your caregiver journey, don't feel like you have to take on too large or involved a gathering your first time around. Only take on what your family feels ready for at this point in your journey.

It may be helpful to let guests know in advance what they can do to help avoid triggers. My husband gets startled when people knock on the door. When inviting guests to our home, I ask them to please call me or text me when they drive up, and either myself or my husband will open the door to greet them. This avoids continuous knocking and his being startled throughout the evening, allowing him to better relax during the event. You know what these triggers are for your family, think of ways you can help guests avoid contributing to them.

Take a Breather

Time is big in our home. If we have friends and family over, my husband grows anxious with all the noise and kids running around. If he starts to feel overwhelmed, he will walk away and go to the other room, and I know he is just taking a breather. I used to misunderstand why this was happening, thinking someone had said something inappropriate to him etc., but it was just him stepping away. Family and friends less familiar with your family may also question where your veteran has gone or why they have left the room. You do not need to explain anymore than is comfortable, you can just say he/she will be back. This will become normal, eventually nobody will question it. I myself take a break once in a while to gather my thoughts.

This time away can also be a good time to practice any coping strategies you or your partner prefer to mitigate stress. This time can be used to take a moment outside or in a separate room to practice deep breathing, mindfulness, or grounding techniques to re-center on the event and not get caught up in the possible dangers or stressors before rejoining the group.

Stick to a Schedule

Time can also help veterans who experience anxiety in large social settings to stay comfortable throughout the evening. Setting firm times for the start and end of an event helps my husband relax, instead of sitting and wondering uncertainly, ‘how long will this event last? How much longer do we have to wait before we leave?’ Stick to a period of time that you and your partner feel is tolerable for them, and don’t push past a length of time that increases the likelihood of triggering distressing symptoms. Knowing that dinner is at 4 but will end at 7 sets a predetermined length of time to prepare for. Again, inform guests as much as you are comfortable to help them stick to this firm end time. You can tell them that it is helpful for your partner to have a firm end time and the night will end no later than 7, or you can simply tell them you have an early morning and the event can’t go on any later than that. Here, again, it is helpful to invite only guests you feel comfortable disclosing your boundaries to, and those you feel will be respectful of your accommodations. Don’t feel bad if you do have to be firm with guests when the night starts to wind down, they should be able to understand the needs of your family.

****If you are attending an event at the home of a family of a veteran or service member dealing with TBI, PTS, or just discomfort in large social settings, listen to any requests you receive for arriving, attending, and leaving the gathering, and know that they come from that family’s experience about how to ensure the event goes smoothly for everyone. Your acknowledgment of and adherence to their requests will mean more than you know.**

Attending an Event as a Guest

A lot of our veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress and other combat-related issues avoid crowded places or going over to friends' homes because the unpredictability of these new environments can make it impossible for them to enjoy themselves. They may not know who will be there, where the exits are, and what may trigger incredibly uncomfortable symptoms of hyper-arousal. No one can enjoy themselves while spending an entire evening restless and ill at ease. Once again planning ahead will help to avoid triggering these symptoms.

Stick to a Schedule

Remember how time is key? My husband and I decided that any time we go to a party, we have a time we agree on to leave, for example 9pm. This allows him to rest and know there will be an end to the socializing.

It is always possible that a crowd may be different than anticipated, or may unexpectedly trigger symptoms. It is always acceptable to leave whenever it feels necessary. If this is your family's first time at a larger gathering in some time, it may take a few tries until you feel comfortable staying at the event for a longer length of time. Congratulate yourself for making the effort, dealing with crowds and large groups isn't easy for those with combat-related stress, but it's an important step to preventing extreme avoidance behavior.

If things are going smoothly, check in at the pre established time. For us, it's a time when we communicate, I ask him around 9pm, *are you ready to leave?* Sometimes he says yes, sometimes he says we can hang around a while longer, and I give him another half hour before checking in again.

Arrive Early

Try to arrive early when going to your friend's/family's home. Sometimes when there are already people at an event and my husband walks in, he immediately begins scanning the place, looking for exits, looking at all the guest as suspects and is already becoming too anxious to enjoy himself. Knowing this, we arrive early, so he can do "recon," and then as people arrive, he sees them walk in one at a time. Arriving early also gives you time to gauge whether things are becoming too overwhelming as more people show up, instead of walking into an already too-large crowd.

If you have a sense the event may grow beyond what is comfortable for your family, it also gives you a chance to make an appearance and get some face time in

with the host and leave earlier in the evening before many guests arrive. This way, you still get to attend the event, and neither you or the host will feel like you missed out.

Communicate with the Host

Again, this is entirely dependent on your comfort level with the host. If you are attending an event at the home of a close friend or family member, it is helpful to let them know ahead of time that you may need to leave due to triggers or symptoms. That way if you do need to make an exit, you can let them know quickly without having to entertain a lengthy explanatory conversation.

****If you are hosting an event and know someone dealing with PTSD/ social anxiety may be attending, understand what aspects of large crowds and social gatherings can be triggering. Be sure to communicate with them if the event grows larger than initially anticipated or any other unexpected changes to the initial description of the gathering, and be sure to let them know they are welcome to arrive early if they'd like. If they need to leave early or have to cancel, understand that it is not for lack of desire to spend time with you. Let them know it was good to see them or that you'll see them next time. No matter how many times a family may have to cancel, don't stop inviting them to social outings.**

Don't Forget About Self Care

While much of the time as a caregiver, you are used to mitigating the stress and symptoms of others, don't forget to put on your own life mask first! The holidays can trigger plenty of your own stress, symptoms, and feelings. Be sure to take the time to check in with yourself, do something that relaxes you, and take time for some of those coping strategies.

Below are a few resources for mindfulness and breathing exercises:

Free Guided Mindfulness Meditations

<http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>

Breathing Exercises

<http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/tc/stress-management-breathing-exercises-topic-overview>

Grounding Exercises

http://www.peirsac.org/peirsacui/er/educational_resources10.pdf

From the Veteran Spouse Network to you, take care of yourself and have a happy holiday season!