HOLIDAY WELLNESS SERIES · PART 1 OF 4

Before You Walk In the Door

Preparing Emotionally for Holiday Gatherings

By Kathy L. Fortner, EdS, LPC, CCMHC, BCC | Monday, November 16, 2026

The holidays have a way of arriving all at once. One minute it's mid-November, and the next you're standing at a front door holding a casserole dish, wondering why your shoulders are already up around your ears.

If the season brings you a mix of joy, nostalgia, dread, and exhaustion, sometimes in the same afternoon, you're not doing it wrong. In more than 25 years of counseling, I've found that the holidays bring up our most important relationships, our oldest memories, and our highest expectations, all at the same time. No wonder it feels like a lot.

The good news is that much of holiday stress can be prevented. The most helpful work happens *before* you walk in the door.

1. Decide How You Want to Feel, Not Just What You Need to Do

Most of us plan the holidays as a to-do list: the menu, the gifts, the travel, the schedule. Few of us plan for how we want to *feel*.

Before the season gets busy, take five quiet minutes and ask yourself:

- What three words describe how I want to feel this season? (Peaceful? Connected? Playful? Rested?)
- What moment from past holidays do I want to experience again?
- What do I want to do differently this year?

When you know your intention, it's easier to say yes to what supports it and no to what doesn't.

2. Plan Your Energy Like You Plan Your Menu

Your energy is a resource with limits, and the holidays spend it fast. Think through your gatherings ahead of time:

- **Arrival and exit:** Decide when you'll arrive and about when you'll leave. A planned exit is far easier than an escape.
- **Breaks:** Build in pauses: a walk after dinner, a few minutes in the car, a quiet trip to the kitchen to refill drinks.
- **Recovery:** Plan downtime after big gatherings. A slow morning the next day can make a full day of family time much easier.

3. Know Your Hot Spots

Most families have predictable flashpoints: politics, parenting choices, weight and food comments, career questions, an old sibling rivalry, the relative who has "just one more" drink. You don't have to be surprised by them.

Write down the two or three topics or situations most likely to hook you. Then decide ahead of time how you'll respond. Calm responses are much easier to reach when you've practiced them beforehand.

4. Boundaries, Said Kindly

A boundary isn't a wall. It's a clear, kind statement of what works for you. A few phrases to keep in your pocket:

- "I'd rather not get into that today. How's your garden doing?"
- "I hear that you feel strongly about it. Let's agree to enjoy the meal."
- "Thanks for your concern. I've got it handled."
- "We're going to head out at 6 so the kids can get to bed."
- "That doesn't work for us this year, but we'd love to see you on the 28th."

Keep it short, warm, and repeatable. You don't owe a long explanation. Say it calmly, change the subject, and repeat if needed.

5. Notice When You Fall Into Old Roles

Many adults notice that the moment they walk into a parent's home, they become 15 again: the peacekeeper, the responsible one, the baby, the rebel. Old family roles are powerful because they were learned early.

The tool here is awareness. When you feel the old role pulling at you, name it quietly to yourself: *"There's the peacekeeper again."* Then take one breath and choose your response as the adult you are today.

6. Get on the Same Page With Your Partner or Co-Parent

Many holiday conflicts start before anyone arrives, between partners who had different expectations. Have a calm planning conversation now:

- Which gatherings are must-attends for each of us?
- How long will we stay, and what's our signal that one of us needs to leave?
- How will we handle gifts and spending?
- For co-parents: What's the schedule, and how will we make handoffs easy for the children?

For blended and co-parenting families, keep the focus on the children's experience of the day, not on keeping score. Children remember the feeling of the holiday far more than the calendar.

7. Make Room for Grief

If someone you love won't be at the table this year, through death, divorce, distance, or estrangement, expect their absence to be felt. Grief often gets louder in December.

You might light a candle, cook their favorite dish, share a story, or simply let yourself step away for a few minutes when you need to. Joy and sorrow can share the same table.

Your Takeaway This Week

Download the free **My Holiday Wellness Plan** worksheet and spend 15 minutes with it this week. Better yet, fill it out with your partner or a trusted friend. Preparation won't make every gathering perfect, but it will help you show up as the person you want to be.

> **Coming next week:** Gratitude That Connects, with simple rituals that turn being together into real connection.

About the Author

Kathy L. Fortner, EdS, LPC, CCMHC, BCC, is a Board Certified Licensed Professional Counselor with more than 25 years of experience and the founder of KLF-Insights. She offers online counseling, life, executive, and wellness coaching, executive coaching, and consulting for individuals, couples, professionals and organizations, with a focus on prevention and wellness.

Need support this season? Kathy L. Fortner, EdS offers tele-health counseling and coaching sessions. Schedule a session with Ms. Fortner by calling 843-240-0446 or emailing the parctice at klfortner2005@gmail.com. Many employers also offer free, confidential counseling through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP); check with your HR department.

In crisis? If you are thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), or call 911.

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