

Kartini Clinic's 5 Tips for Handling the Holidays

It's that time of year again... time to talk about how to handle the Holidays when your child or loved one has an eating disorder (and especially if they are currently in treatment, or have just completed a higher level of care).

As a family centered pediatric eating disorder program, at Kartini Clinic we spend a good deal of time talking (and preparing) for the Holidays. After all, food plays an integral part in virtually every cultural tradition, and rightly so. Families and friends, gathering to celebrate over favorite meals and treats. Few things are better than that, right?

Nevertheless, these celebrations can also present challenges for our parents and children alike.

Give a listen to our new podcast about handling the Holidays, and then head over to our blog for our "5 tips on How to Handle the Holidays."

1. Prioritize Structure Over Tradition - If your family chooses to have a "Christmas as usual," it's critical not to let the daily structure fall apart just because school is out.

- **Stick to the schedule:** ensure your child sticks to regular meals with no skipping and no bingeing.
- **Plan effectively:** Recognize that holiday meal panic is real: many crises can be averted with forethought and a solid plan for how the day will unfold.

2. Modify or Skip Gatherings - We suggest parents may want to make certain (temporary) sacrifices this year to ensure many merry holidays in the future.

- **Skip the big events:** If you have a large, "unruly" extended family, we often recommend skipping the big get-together entirely (remember: not permanently!).
- **Keep it small:** Instead, opt for a quiet time at home with fewer people. Suggested activities include playing Monopoly or Scrabble, working on puzzles, or volunteering.
- **Reduce "Infield Chatter":** By limiting the audience, you protect the child from painful comments by uninformed (but well meaning) relatives regarding their weight, food intake, or treatment costs.

3. Ban "Vicarious Eating" Projects - Baking is a major holiday activity, but it presents significant risks for children with eating disorders.

- **No baking without eating:** Parents should refuse to let their child engage in "vicarious eating" -- projects where the child bakes extravagantly for others but refuses to eat any of it themselves.
- **Avoid the "worst scenarios":** Be vigilant of scenarios where baking leads to bingeing on hyperpalatable foods or causes panic and meltdowns due to the presence of sweets.

- **Substitute activities:** Replace baking with non-food activities, such as decorating the house, the tree, or their rooms.

4. Monitor Physical Activity (e.g. shopping!) - For children who are medically precarious or struggling to gain weight, the physical exertion of the Holidays can be dangerous.

- **Shop online:** Holiday shopping often involves walking for hours and miles without anyone noticing the calorie expenditure. The clinic recommends doing shopping online to prevent this hidden physical strain (note: also no dressing room mirrors!).

5. Reframe the Holiday Focus - We encourage families to "make lemonade" out of the situation by shifting the focus away from a "food fest" and toward values like gratitude and giving.

- **Focus on giving:** Help younger children make meaningful presents and encourage older kids to think of ways to give to friends and family that do not involve food or buying material goods.
- **Volunteer:** Suggest volunteering at animal shelters, churches, or schools to help children understand that others may not have what they do [6].

Finally, we offer a reminder: **January is a clean slate.** Once the season is over, the stress is behind you, offering a fresh start for hope, health, healing and growth in the New Year.

Happy Holidays from the team at Kartini Clinic!