The leaves have fallen and the ads in our Sunday paper are promoting their annual holiday gathering wares as if nothing has changed. But it has. Some are grieving—or living in fear of—the loss of loved ones to the coronavirus; all of us are grieving the loss of traditions and rituals, each in our own way. Have you caught yourself beginning to plan for holiday meals, gifts, and traditions, only to stop short? It’s not uncommon to focus on the meaning of our holidays and traditions only when we fall exhausted into the holiday world we endeavored to create. This year? We need to find new ways to observe what matters to us, cope, and perhaps even thrive.

Since everything is upside down this year, begin at the end. Here’s an exercise to help you visualize what is actually possible. Imagine you are talking with a friend in early January, checking in about the past few weeks. As you think back while comparing experiences, you realize that you found surprising fulfillment, less stress, and true connections. What will you tell your friend about how you got there? How did you begin with the meaning of the holidays and how did you support that?

Holiday stress arises from intertwined triggers: financial, relationship, physical, time pressures, environmental, emotional, and others. This year, all are overshadowed by the times we are living in—the pandemic, economic factors, social justice issues, and a national election. If we are mindful of the goals we hope to reach, our tasks and decisions may more easily fall into place.

Financial. Setting and sticking with a holiday budget is always a challenge. Now circumstances for you and those in your circle have changed. Some may hide that they are struggling. Focus on gifts for children, choose a charity, consider gift cards to businesses that are most impacted, or make family/friend agreements to limit or eliminate gifts; perhaps you make donations to charity in each other’s honor instead. The point is to reduce the stress of uncertainty and give everyone a break. What can your dollars most meaningfully support? If you have previously sent gifts to clients, those boxes of chocolate may be delivered to an empty office. Consider...
a charity as a token of your gratitude for their business.

**Relationships.** Too many of us have lost someone. How will you honor that person in your traditions? Perhaps this is the year to start new ones. Sometimes a large source of holiday stress is spending time with people you would rather not see, especially in an election year. The pandemic allows us—in fact, the governor’s order requires us—to strictly limit our contacts for health and safety reasons. But many people, inevitably, will choose to gather anyway. If you are part of such a gathering, there are many other safeguards you can use to limit size and exposure. People in recovery will often have an escape plan if they feel uncomfortable in the presence of alcohol. Similarly, what will be your escape plan if you don’t feel safe or respected? The governor’s guidelines for gatherings can help us draw clear lines. The loss of connection and togetherness is hard, and people don’t always know what is safe; the latest CDC guidelines are at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov); enter “holidays” in the search box.

**Physical.** The fact that we may share fewer sumptuous meals and holiday treats this year may ultimately benefit our health. This time of year many of us burn the candle at both ends—it’s a status symbol to be busy, miss sleep, and juggle multiple demands and projects. Sometimes we drink too much. What is meaningful to you about holiday food? Can you teach someone to make a treasured recipe over a virtual platform so you both can share it with those in your household?

**Time pressures.** What will you do with the time you would have spent at your favorite bar association’s holiday party? Rather than adding something else, can you slow down and reflect or do a better job on something that was getting short shrift? Year-end and month-end deadlines will continue to exist. By leaving open times open, you may feel less deadline pressure.

**Environmental.** Our profession tends toward perfectionism and this can explode when we try to create perfect surroundings and events. This year, let the need to simplify extend to your surroundings. Must you unpack every box? Environmental factors also include traditions such community tree-lighting or solstice celebrations. You may need to miss or change some of these, and you have a choice about the impact on you. If you are distressed about something changing or missing, ask “what can I control about this?” If it really is out of your control, where can you find the best in what is available?

**Emotional.** This may take the largest toll this year—and offer the greatest opportunity. We are grieving, we are sad, we are afraid. All of this is normal. Give yourself relaxation breaks, especially when you notice yourself feeling stressed or anxious. Take some down time to stop, breathe deeply, and exhale the tension.

Take time to reflect on what matters most to you. Setting holiday priorities brings a healthier perspective and reduces stress. Self-help strategies can work wonders, but sometimes more help is needed. If you are feeling persistently sad or anxious or irritable, experiencing physical complaints, not sleeping, or find yourself overindulging—especially in alcohol—beyond your comfort level, talk to your doctor, mental health professional, or call Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers for resources. Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers is free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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