

Ask an Expert – Thinking Outside the Box for 2020 Thanksgiving

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Recent recommendations from Governor Gary Herbert have stated that the Thanksgiving holiday must be different this year if we are to lower our record-high COVID-19 numbers. These recommendations can leave us wondering how to manage the changes while still keeping our family traditions alive and staying close to loved ones. Consider these tips.

Talking to Loved Ones about Gathering

* Recognize that your family members may not agree with your choice to attend/not attend gatherings this year. However, it is important to express your needs and feelings, focusing on keeping everyone safe and healthy. Always be kind, and express how you feel using "I" statements, such as I feel ____ because _____. Also, don't forget to listen.

* Before talking with family members, engage in self-care and make sure your head is clear. Remember that you cannot control how other people think, feel, or act; the only person you can control is yourself. For more information on having difficult conversations, visit

<https://extension.usu.edu/relationships/how-to-communicate-during-stressful-times>.

Preparing Food

* Simplify as much as possible. It's okay (and necessary) to cut back this year – from the menu, to the activities, to time spent at another house or the time people spend at your house. This is a good year to keep it short and have people head back to their own homes for a nap, a movie

or a puzzle. Consider regrouping later over FaceTime or playing an interactive game through a video call.

* The state suggests avoiding potlucks, and, instead having one person prepare all the food. To avoid burdening the host or the person doing all the cooking, consider assigning foods out that are pre-packaged or pre-wrapped from a store or restaurant, such as rolls, pies or salads.

Another option is to encourage those coming to make and bring their own plate of food (remember, we are thinking outside the box this year!). The food can either be homemade or picked up from a local grocery store or restaurant.

* Avoid buffet-style or family-style serving. One person should be assigned to dish out and serve the food. This person should wear a mask and serving gloves. Purchase pre-packaged condiments such as butter and salad dressing to limit the time the server has to spend dishing up each person's plate.

* Place hand sanitizer in multiple places so it is readily available for guests.

* Rearrange furniture prior to the gathering to provide more space between guests.

Planning Alternative Gathering Activities

* If the weather permits, consider taking your activities outdoors. Bundle up and go on a walk. Take advantage of the opportunity to share what you're grateful for, play a game of neighborhood "I spy" or just enjoy the fresh air.

* If there isn't snow on the ground, break out the sidewalk chalk. Create a work of art, write a list of what you're grateful for or make an obstacle course. If there's snow in your area, bundle up and make a snowman, scoop your neighbor's driveway or tie-dye the snow.

* If you live near a loved one who is not able to attend the gathering, consider going for a Thanksgiving drive-by with those in your household. Stay in your car and wave, or drop off food in a sanitized container.

* The governor recommends that all guests wear masks indoors and outdoors when gathering. If guests are coming to your house, remind them to bring a mask, but also have masks on hand in case someone forgets. One way to make mask-wearing fun is to turn it into an activity. Have a station set up with markers, stickers and other supplies in

a large room, the garage or outdoors where everyone can decorate their own face covering.

* If you have guests who want to video conference into the gathering, but you are limited on space or cool tech toys, you can use a big sheet as a projector screen and your phone as the projector. Here is a 10-15 minute DIY project you can do ahead of time:

<https://www.techbout.com/turn-phone-into-projector-421/>.

Staying in Touch

* If you choose not to visit family this holiday season and gather virtually instead, it is still important to follow up after the holidays and stay connected, especially this year. Reach out via phone, text, email and video chat. You can use these platforms to laugh with your loved ones, compliment them and listen to them. You can also share goals and ideas for the future. Though things are different, enjoy those things that you can do, and plan to do them often. And don't forget snail mail as a way to communicate. Everyone loves to get something in the mail that's not a bill!

* Express your feelings of gratitude for family members. Expressing gratitude can improve your mood and the mood of those around you. Learn more about cultivating an attitude of gratitude here: <https://extension.usu.edu/relationships/cultivating-an-attitude-of-gratitude>.

* Though we can't hug everyone, we are still able to hug those in our immediate household. The power of touch provides physical and emotional responses that are difficult to replicate. Touch releases oxytocin which enhances a sense of trust, attachment and even love. Touch also reduces levels of stress hormones and lowers heart rate. For a boost of oxytocin, hold/hug the members of your immediate household for an extra-long time, multiple times a day. You will both benefit physically and mentally. For more information, see the article at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201303/the-power-touch>.

* For more tips and resources on staying happy and healthy during COVID, visit <https://stayhappystayhealthy.usu.edu>.

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