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Now that restrictions are tighter in a number of areas, avoiding paying the price in 2021 may be more achievable. Shyntartanya/Shutterstock

## How to manage family expectations and avoid breaking rules this Christmas

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The festive period heightens the sort of inner conflicts that have characterised 2020. On one hand, it is socially responsible to keep our distance. On the other, it feels wrong to leave someone alone at Christmas.

Many of us will find ourselves confronted with these trade-offs over the coming weeks as we face the challenges of navigating tighter COVID restrictions and a new strain of the virus.

We have been thinking a lot about these questions, not only as they apply to our own lives but also as part of a research project around COVID fear and how it is experienced by older people in Scotland.

With that in mind, here are some steps that we think might help you and your loved ones enjoy a safe and pleasant Christmas:

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## 1. Plan

No self-aware human being is oblivious to the likelihood of making mistakes in the heat of the moment, mistakes they would not have made if they had taken a step back and considered the situation.



If you're worried about observing COVID restrictions in the face of family commitments, it's wise to set rules for yourself.  
Dragon Images/Shutterstock

Psychological research on this pattern suggests three causes: First, when we visualise a situation from a distance (in time or in space), it is easier to perceive the black and white lines that determine what is appropriate from what is not.

When we are close to the action, the noise and bustle of the context cause us to see things in shades of grey. The same can be applied to our perceptions of people: we tend to consider those we know and love to be less at risk of spreading Covid than equivalently exposed strangers.

Second, temptations are more easily reduced when they are distant than when they are sitting right in front of us, playing off all of our senses and triggering visceral desires.

Third, our willpower is not perfect. Of course, willpower is further eroded by alcohol and fatigue (such as that induced by having children around the house for two weeks). A simple step to overcome all of these mechanisms is to set an “if-then” rule in advance. That might be something like: “if I go into the neighbour’s garden for a gathering then I will not remove my mask”.

## 2. Communicate your plans to loved ones and housemates

The festive period is imbued with tradition and unspoken conventions. Because those conventions are unspoken, it is hard to know which of them our friends and family hold dear as meaningful rituals.



Even if you do find yourself having to decline an invitation, the consequences of doing so are probably better than you expect. Dragana Gordic/Shutterstock

Suddenly, every invitation has placed us in a dilemma of causing insult on the one hand and (potentially) causing illness on the other. If we receive an invitation, social pressure makes it hard to decline. The mechanisms outlined in the previous section mean it is particularly hard to refuse when invited to do something right away, and when the invitation is made in person.

For all these reasons, it is helpful to communicate your plans to loved ones as quickly as you can. Unusually, this year will likely see people remaining in shared accommodation during the festive period, rather than returning home. Planning and communicating clearly in these circumstances is additionally important given the likely diversity in extended groups of friends and family amongst house mates.

Even if you do find yourself having to decline an invitation, the consequences of doing so are probably better than you expect. A series of experiments by psychologists at Harvard Business School found those who decline social invitations consistently overestimate the negative interpersonal costs (such as social rejection or a decline in relationships). They also underestimated the benefits (such as hosts being more likely to reconsider hosting their social event after receiving a refusal).

## 3. Give thought to finding substitute activities

It is hard to be upfront with downbeat news but it is better than the alternatives. It is harder on everyone to disappoint on the day and it is a disaster to reluctantly go along with plans simply in order to avoid disappointing people.

One of the ways you can make it more palatable to your hosts when you decline an invitation is by immediately coming back with an alternative suggestion. It will also make you more comfortable as it avoids that awkward “how can I put this?” shuffle.

As an example, one of the authors of this article had to let their dear mum know that, for the first time, they would not be coming home for Christmas. To help kindle some special connection remotely, they asked their mum to be the subject of a Desert Island Discs-style interview that they are now recording each weekend morning as a treasured memory.

For most of us, 2020 has been a year unlike any we have previously encountered. Now that restrictions are tighter in a number of areas, avoiding paying the price in 2021 may be more achievable. Although steering clear of breaking the rules may be difficult for some given our tendency towards overvaluing immediate gains and underappreciating future costs, we hope the suggestions above can help us all to have a merry Christmas as well as a healthy new year.

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