

Alone Together: 14 Ideas for a Virtual Holiday

NOVEMBER 19, 2020

Whatsyourgrief.com

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In a year of unprecedented loss, there is a fair chance that facing the holidays is filling you with dread. If so, you're not alone. More than ever, this year people are thinking about traditions that will have to shift or won't happen at all. After a year of distancing and isolation, the thought of a holiday without the usual family togetherness may feel like a difficult pill to swallow. We have heard many people asking for virtual holiday celebration ideas if you can't be with your family for the holiday. There are no brilliant plans that will make things feel 'normal' in a world that is anything but. But we do have some creative ideas that can allow you to feel close with family when you can't be together for the holiday.

A quick note on the language we use around here – when we say “family”, we mean blood family or found family.

Let's get started, from the obvious virtual holiday ideas to some more creative suggestions.

1. Have a Virtual Holiday Meal

Yes, this is the most obvious, but we at least have to mention it! Zoom is not just for work meetings. Find a platform your family is comfortable with, set a time, and plan to all join and have your holiday meal with one another on-screen! No, it won't be the same. Not even close. But just because something isn't the same doesn't mean it can't have meaning and value. Pro-tip: if you have family members who aren't tech-savvy, you may want to do a trial run to make sure everyone is comfortable.

2. Have a Sides and Dessert Exchange

If your family lives locally but you all won't be spending the day together for safety reasons, you can still share the same meal. Have each person make a side dish (ideally one that reheats well) that is enough to feed everyone. Split it up into containers. Plan a socially distanced exchange, dropping the dish off at doorsteps. Whether you then share a virtual meal together or each eat on your own, there can be a nice comfort in sharing food with those you love and knowing everyone is having the same meal!

3. Have a Recipe Exchange

If you aren't in the same area or don't feel comfortable doing a side-dish share, another alternative is simply gathering recipes through an exchange. You'll basically be planning your holiday meal by each submitting one recipe. Each person (or household) picks a recipe to share for the menu and then everyone makes the same recipes in their own homes for the holiday. This gives the nice connection of everyone having the same meal for your virtual holiday, with the added bonus of sharing new recipes!

4. Teach the Family Recipes

This is a great year for families to pass on the tradition of some of their family recipes that one person always makes. This could be a dish your loved one made or loved, or just any significant recipe to pass along. If you have people in your household to teach, that's great. But if you don't, this is another place where Zoom or FaceTime can come in handy. Take a cue from this great radio story about a grandmother who used Zoom for just this reason! Set up a time to virtually coach family members through those recipes.

5. Play Games

I know when we talk about games in a virtual world, people often jump to games that can be played online. But there are plenty of game options for your virtual holiday celebration.

- Online games: Check out Jackbox or a similar service.
- You can play old fashioned board games too, assuming each person has a copy of the game. Each person sets up their board in their home, and you just have to move the other person on your board after their turn, so everyone can keep track in their respective houses! Not the perfect game night, but could be worse!
- Trivia is always an easy virtual option. To take the work off one planner (and to make sure everyone gets to participate in the fun) you can have each person create a round of questions! You can also use Kahoot to search for already-made trivia or to make your own.
- Bingo is a great virtual game. There are even cute winter-themed ready-to-print bingo cards out there... Just make sure you tell people which cards to use/print, so everyone isn't playing with the same card. You can also create your own custom bingo boards online and play virtually.
- Pictionary is super fun to play over Zoom for those who are a bit more tech-savvy! Simply use the whiteboard feature and a pictionary word generator to take turns guessing!

6. Plan a 'Christmas or Hanukkah in July'

Now, this one could be risky, as we don't know what July will hold. But if your family is skipping the gathering this year, put it on the calendar now for July. Though of course, you can still join virtual services to participate in the spiritual aspects of the holiday, the family festivities will be put entirely on hold. You may even want to jump on a Zoom during the holidays just to talk about and start planning your big holiday in July! Bonus: There are some great flight deals right now with no change or cancellation fees, so if travel is part of your Christmas in July plan, now is a good time to book.

7. Use the Virtual Holiday Time to Create Something as a Family – A photo album, an oral history, or something else creative!

If a huge part of what you feel you're losing this holiday is family togetherness, use the day to create something as a family. The options are endless, but some ideas are:

- Collect all those digital photos you all have on different devices and create a family photo book.
- Start a family memories archive. After a loss, we become so aware of how family histories or memories are lost when people die. Create questions that you would

like your family to all answer about themselves and/or each other and start creating an oral history for the family. We have a post on creating an oral history here with tons of information to get you started.

- Gather on Zoom and work on your ancestry together.
- Create a family recipe book by compiling all of your go-to recipes on a GoogleDoc, or use an online service.

8. Have a Ginger Bread House Making Competition.

Plan for each person or family to make their own Gingerbread House. Everyone can jump on Zoom and hang out while making them, or just set a time to all join together to show off your Gingerbread Houses and have a judging! (If you use Zoom, you could set up a poll that would allow everyone to vote for their favorite). For those who live alone, this could leave them with a big Gingerbread House to eat all alone... but hey, it's been a tough year. Maybe we all deserve a Gingerbread House all to ourselves!

9. Watch a Holiday Movie 'Together'

Now, you can do this the old fashioned way. Just hit play at the same time and chat by text. But there are also services that make this more integrated. You can use Netflix Party (now officially called teleparty). You can also check out this article on the 7 best ways to watch movies together online for other services.

10. Create New Traditions

When we are so caught up focusing on the traditions that have to change, we sometimes forget that we can start new traditions. Sometimes we feel guilty about the holidays not being perfect. Accept that holiday traditions will need to change and remember that you can start new traditions! Maybe you decide to try a new recipe based on all that pandemic cooking and baking you've been doing this year that will forever be remembered as the "COVID sweet potato souffle". Perhaps you decide to go for a family socially-distanced morning walk or hike that could become a new tradition. Be creative. Having a non-traditional or virtual holiday opens up all sorts of possibilities! And even if it doesn't turn out to be a tradition that sticks, no harm done for trying!

11. Have a Virtual White Elephant Gift Exchange.

Now, you may be doing the regular gift thing this year. But if not being together or tight finances are giving you a reason for pause, a White Elephant exchange might be just the thing! If you don't know how it works, teambuilding.com has a full article on how to do a virtual White Elephant gift exchange. Check out their full post for details, but the basics are pretty straightforward:

- Set a budget.
- Instruct all participants to buy and wrap a fun present.
- Gather together on a video call.
- Choose a picking order. You can use a generator like random.org to determine the order.
- Gifters will hold up all presents. You could also use a PowerPoint template to display the options.
- Each participant picks a present. The gifter unwraps on camera.

- The next player takes a turn, either stealing the present or unwrapping a new present.
- The game continues until all presents are gone.
- Once the event concludes, gifters send presents to the rightful owners.

12. Skip the Meal – Have a virtual holiday “tasting party”!

A whole virtual holiday meal on Zoom can feel like a lot, so this can be a nice way to share some time and food together without it being a full meal! This takes some time for shopping and shipping, so you might want to get going if your family likes this idea. Plan for a special “tasting” of some fancy pre or post-meal goodies. Do this based on what your family likes – You could all sample fancy cheeses before dinner, fancy wine, fancy hot chocolate after dinner (yes, there are all sorts of types of hot chocolate), or fancy truffles or other desserts. The key is to get the samples sent out to everyone in advance or give everyone the list to buy/order themselves, so everything arrives on time. Then gather together on Zoom for some quality time and to taste your yummy goodies together!

13. Create a Family Gratitude Video or Have a Gratitude Zoom

This has been a tough year and it might be a tough holiday. Find a way as a family to share some gratitude. Maybe you don’t want to have a full Zoom meal, but you can set a time to all jump on Zoom and share something you’re grateful for. If one person doesn’t mind compiling it, alternately you could ask each person to record a short video of their gratitude that could then be edited together and sent out to the whole family to watch.

14. Have a Memory Show-and-Tell

Ask each person to bring one photo or other object that reminds them of a favorite memory of the person or people in your family who have died. Have everyone go around on Zoom and show their photo or object and tell the story that goes with it!