A message from Dr. Peter Yellowlees, Chief Wellness Officer

Celebrating during the pandemic holiday season

I am writing this in the knowledge that COVID-19 infections are rapidly increasing, as are deaths, and that it is essential for all of us to keep up with our public health mitigation behaviors for the foreseeable future. Social distancing, masking and excellent personal hygiene are essential for the good of ourselves, our loved ones and families, our community and our nation.

This means, in accordance with CDC guidelines, that for most of us there will be minimal physical family gatherings over Thanksgiving or other winter holidays many enjoy, including Christmas and Hanukkah, except with small numbers of people who are already in our “social bubbles.” Self-quarantining needs and travel restrictions will make many physical events unrealistic. This holiday season will be different. It will be challenging for many of us, especially those working during the holidays.

So, what can we do instead of the traditional Thanksgiving dinner and other multi-generational celebrations?

Here are a few ideas:

1. If weather permits, your small groups may meet outside to celebrate the holidays, if you can maintain social distancing. The number of people gathering in person should be kept small this year. Many in our area have outdoor heaters and are having people bring food already prepared and ready to serve in the backyard. The key here is to keep out of tight spaces, such
as cooking together or cleaning up afterwards in your kitchens. Some may choose to meet during the warmest part of the day, so gathering outside is more realistic. The children will be happy to have hot chocolate whether inside or outside.

2. Zoom with family and/or friends as a “hybrid party” with some people attending in-person, but socially distanced, and some attending online. Many of us have been doing this for months, to keep in touch with one another and stay connected. Arrange online schedules in advance and don’t assume everyone is a “Zoomer.” Offer a little technical support in advance so your online connections go smoothly over the holidays. There are so many video platforms now and a little assistance in advance may be greatly appreciated.

3. Make sure that all members of the family or friends (especially those who are isolated) have help connecting via technology, if they need it. If you have teenage children, giving them the responsibility of ensuring everyone is connected and included would be a great job that gives them an important role. You may discover the 14-year-old Chief Information Officer of the future who can allow different family members to chat in Zoom break-out rooms!

4. Plan activities for both the in-person and hybrid groups. Here is a list of 15 Virtual Thanksgiving Celebration ideas on how to creatively use Zoom for family and group games and fun. Take pictures. Play music. Maybe candles on the tables. Make it as festive and traditional as possible. If possible, a fire pit? Hot chocolate around the fire?

Here are some specific ideas that I like:

* Guided video-narrated walks of an interesting area on FaceTime/Zoom – perhaps a new home, a beach, some woods, bird watching, an interesting town, your newly planted winter garden?
* Zoom jeopardy on topics of interest to the family or Zoom singalongs or individual performances – preferably recorded for future watching. Depending on the number of attendees, consider a round-robin where each person is invited to identify something for which they are grateful, or describe their favorite family holiday tradition. You may want to give everyone a heads up that you will be asking about gratitude, so they have time to reflect before you “gather.”
* Indoor/outdoor distributed scavenger hunts on Zoom, with multiple people looking in different homes (will need some adult preparation beforehand!)
* Cooking and cocktail preparation parties – everyone must make different things and maybe share the recipes with each other.
* Watch sports or movies together as a distanced group and set up a group chat so that you can all communicate throughout the event – this can be great fun, especially if you have family members supporting different teams! As a lifelong Manchester United soccer fan, I’ve been connecting online for the past six months with my family in England to watch our favorite soccer teams together. We all agree this has made us feel closer and more connected during these difficult times.

5. This has always been a season of giving. There are many ways to help one another this season. Help at a food bank or other charity, in a safe way. Arrange for delivered meals (especially to colleagues who are working in the hospital). Think of people you know who may be lonely or isolated and connect with them – perhaps invite them to share your family celebration online. Put small care packages together, especially for colleagues – the thought is
really appreciated especially when it comes with a personal note. There is an unending need for care packages containing lip balm, cookies, hand cream, energy bars, eye masks, ear plugs, pens, cloth masks, sanitizing wipes and fidget toys and if you can manage it, think of phone rechargers, reading lights and jump drives.

Whatever you do, know that you are appreciated. Thank you. You are an essential worker. Your work and sacrifice will help us get through this pandemic. We will succeed and gradually move forward. I know these times can be frustrating and distressing, but we can try to make the best of these difficult days. I hope you are able to enjoy the holiday season as much as possible with friends, family and/or colleagues. Think of your families and friends, of your love for them, and theirs for you. Be grateful and help those who are not as fortunate.

This time will pass.

D14 Orthopaedics/Trauma
"I was impressed by the coordination of the entire team – esp. at discharge time!"

D12 Surgical Specialties
"By far the nursing staff were the best part of my hospital stay."

Midtown Pediatrics
"I noticed that the office staggered appointments so only 1 family was in the waiting room at a time. I thought this was really smart & thoughtful to help protect us & our baby from potential exposure to COVID-19."

Otolaryngology Glassrock
"Friendly and caring staff. Always answered any questions I had. Called afterward to see how I was doing."

D7 Pediatrics
"I appreciate how quick a specialist was made available to assist my child. Thank you so much!"