

Tips for a Virtual Holiday Gathering

This year, your holiday gatherings may be very different from any you've experienced before. For many, the continuing COVID-19 pandemic means that extended families and groups of friends won't gather in person. However, you can gather virtually, using your electronic devices and a virtual meeting platform.

Virtual gatherings can provide great comfort and reassurance in uncertain times, letting us see the faces and hear the voices of our loved ones. But like any group event, virtual gatherings can benefit from some advance planning and a few simple guidelines.

Choose the Virtual Platform

- Choose a virtual meeting platform that everyone can access for free. Popular choices include Facebook Portal, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Skype and Zoom.
- Check on any time or attendance limits set by the platform and plan accordingly.

Set the Date and Time

- Like any gathering, virtual gatherings need a date and start time that's shared with everyone in advance.
- If you're not all in the same region, make sure everyone is aware of the gathering time in their time zone.
- Consider setting an ending time as well, so everyone knows what to expect.

Select a Host

- One member of your group should serve as the overall organizer and host of the gathering.
- The host should schedule the meeting, send the invitation to all participants, and keep track of who will attend.
- The host can also act as a facilitator during the gathering, making sure everyone has a chance to talk and stepping in if too many people talk at once.

Hold a Test Event

- Consider holding a test event about a week before your scheduled gathering to make sure everyone is able to connect.
- Select a "tech specialist" – someone in the group who has some experience with virtual meetings – to help those with less expertise.

Curb the Commotion

If your family and friends tend to talk over each other in person, a virtual gathering might be the same. If you need a few ground rules, here are some things to consider:

- Ask the group to do their best to take turns talking, and try not to talk over others.
- Keep your microphone on mute unless you are talking.

- Make sure your device is plugged in (and that no one will trip over the cord) or fully charged.
- Avoid having a bright light (a large lamp or sunny window) behind you, which can make it difficult for others to see you on screen.
- Remove or reduce distractions (for example, silence the ringer on your phone; close doors and window coverings to reduce outside noise).
- If you have experience using small group chats in a virtual setting (such as a Zoom breakout room), consider putting your guests into small groups for a few minutes before reuniting; this works well for certain games and Q&As.
- Give your full attention to the virtual gathering; it's precious time.

Decide How to Start Your Time Together

A virtual gathering can be a little awkward at first, especially if some participants are not used to interacting online. It may help to begin with an activity. Here are some ideas:

- **Share a Favorite Holiday Memory:** Have each participant (or each set of participants who are physically together) talk about a favorite holiday memory or tradition.
- **Show a Decoration:** Ask everyone to hold up a favorite holiday decoration and tell the story behind it.
- **Tasty Treats:** In advance, ask everyone to prepare their favorite holiday treat to show to the group, and be ready to share the recipe.
- **Give a Toast:** Ask everyone to raise a glass of a favorite beverage; the host can give a toast that acknowledges everyone present, or everyone can say a few words of welcome.

Then, Keep Things Going

Here are some ideas to keep the conversation going in an organized way. Remember, the most important thing to do is have fun:

- **Q&A:** The host can read a question, then each participant group can share their thoughts. Our favorite question is, "What are you most grateful for this year?"
- **Singalong:** Ask everyone to join in some favorite holiday songs.
- **Read a Story:** Select a favorite seasonal short story or children's book to read aloud.
- **Share the [CommonSpirit Health Thanksgiving Message](#):** The host can read it aloud, or send it out in advance and ask everyone to share their thoughts about it during your time together.

Saying Goodbye

- The host can thank everyone for attending and ask if the group would like to meet again virtually. It could become a new tradition!
- The host can ask each participant to say a few words of thanks or goodbye before closing the gathering.