

Holidays — Happy or Horrible?

Exploring the real reality of holidays

Holidays are often presented as something we should automatically enjoy. For some people they are exciting, restorative and full of positive experiences. For others they can bring anxiety, exhaustion, sensory overload, disrupted routines, food difficulties, family tension or pressure to appear happy. Many people experience a mixture of both.

There is no correct way to feel about going away.

Why holidays can feel different

A holiday changes many of the things that usually help us predict and organise daily life: where we sleep, what we eat, how we travel, who we spend time with, the sounds and smells around us, our routine, our privacy and the amount of control we have over the day.

For somebody who relies on familiarity, sensory regulation, safe foods, predictable routines or recovery time, even a lovely destination can require a huge amount of physical and emotional work.

Happy *and* horrible can coexist

You can enjoy the sea and hate the airport. You can love being with family and desperately need time alone. You can be grateful for a holiday and still find parts of it difficult. Mixed feelings do not cancel each other out.

Before You Go — Know What You Need

Planning does not remove every difficulty, but it can reduce unnecessary demands.

My holiday needs

Area	What would make this easier for me?
Travel	
Sleep / accommodation	
Food / eating	
Sensory needs	
Routine / predictability	
Time alone / recovery	
Medication / health needs	
Communication / support	

Useful questions

- Do I know what the journey will involve?
- Can I see pictures or information about the accommodation beforehand?
- What familiar items would help me settle?
- Do I need safe or familiar foods available?
- Where can I go if I need quiet?
- Which activities are optional?
- How will I communicate when I need a break?
- Do I need an easier first or final day?

Common Holiday Pressure Points

Travel

Airports, stations, traffic, queues, delays and unfamiliar journeys can combine uncertainty with noise, crowds and time pressure. Build in extra time where possible, keep essential items accessible and consider what will help you regulate during waiting periods.

Sensory overload

Heat, bright light, unfamiliar beds, hotel corridors, restaurant noise, swimming pools, crowds, smells and different clothing can all add sensory load. Sunglasses, headphones, familiar toiletries, comfortable clothing or planned quiet periods may help.

Food

Eating away from home can be particularly difficult for people with allergies, intolerances, ARFID, eating disorders, sensory differences or anxiety around unfamiliar food. Planning safe options is not “being difficult”; it can be an important part of making the trip manageable.

Family and social expectations

Being together for long periods can reduce privacy and recovery time. You are allowed to need space even when you care about the people you are travelling with.

Routine disruption

Later meals, different sleep times and spontaneous plans may be enjoyable for some people and destabilising for others. Keeping a few anchors — morning routine, familiar breakfast, medication time, evening wind-down — can create useful predictability.

Financial pressure

Holidays can carry expectations to spend on meals, activities, gifts or upgrades. Agreeing a realistic budget before travelling can reduce anxiety and resentment.

My Holiday Wellbeing Plan

Three things I am looking forward to:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Three things I am concerned about:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What I can prepare:

What I cannot control:

My signs that I am becoming overloaded:

What helps me regulate:

- Quiet ■ Time alone ■ Movement ■ Familiar food ■ Headphones
■ Rest ■ Routine ■ Support from someone ■ Other: _____

A phrase I can use when I need a break:

While You Are Away

Try checking in with yourself before you reach empty.

A quick holiday check-in

Question	My check-in
How is my energy?	Low / Medium / High
How overloaded do I feel?	0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Have I eaten / drunk enough for my needs?	Yes / Not yet / Need support
Have I had any quiet or recovery time?	Yes / No
Am I doing this because I want to or because I feel I should?	_____
What would make the next few hours easier?	_____

Permission to do holidays differently

You do not have to see every attraction, eat at every restaurant, stay out late, socialise continuously or make every minute “count”. A slower holiday is still a holiday. Returning to the accommodation for a rest is not wasting the day. Choosing familiarity is not failing to embrace the experience.

If things go wrong

Delays, illness, bad weather, arguments or plans that do not work can happen. Focus on the next manageable decision rather than rescuing the entire holiday at once.

Coming Home — The Part We Forget

A holiday may finish when you arrive home, but your nervous system may still need time to recover.

The post-holiday dip

Some people feel flat, irritable, exhausted or overwhelmed after travelling. This can reflect disrupted sleep, sensory load, social effort, the return to responsibilities, or simply the amount of processing involved in being somewhere unfamiliar.

Build in recovery where possible

Consider leaving space before returning to work or major commitments. Unpack gradually. Return to familiar food and routines. Reduce unnecessary demands. Sleep and rest may need to take priority for a while.

My after-holiday reflection

What genuinely helped me enjoy the holiday?

What was harder than I expected?

What would I change next time?

What do I want to remember?

A Message From Me

A holiday does not have to look like somebody else's holiday to be worthwhile. You are allowed to plan around your needs, choose rest, take familiar things with you, eat what feels manageable, say no to an activity and need time alone.

If you come home thinking, "I enjoyed parts of it, but it was also really hard," both parts of that sentence can be true. Your wellbeing matters wherever you go.

Space to Breathe Therapy

This resource is for psychoeducation and self-reflection and is not a substitute for individual medical or mental-health advice.