

COPING AT CHRISTMAS TIME

Tips for stress, tension, loneliness and grief



What the Christmas and Festive Season can feel like

Christmas time can be many things - including joyful, restful, busy and demanding. The season invokes the important social, spiritual and emotional arenas of our lives. For some it's all fun and for others, it spells 'stress'.



Christmas can bring mixed feelings to those who have lost loved ones or are separated or isolated due to distance and other circumstances. It's helpful for us all to be mindful of these circumstances, yet keep the fun, spirit and lightness that helps us relax and enjoy the festive season. Be aware of how people are coping around you, a word of kindness may help them get through the day.

We collated some tips from a number of sources for you to read and share.

Tips for Gatherings and Events

- Set **realistic expectations** of yourself and others; things won't always go the way we want them, and if we accept this, we can reduce the pressure we put on ourselves to make things perfect
- **Plan** for key events: making task lists, delegating tasks, setting up a responsible drinking and driving-home plan, wrap gifts before the day, allow extra time for a buffer zone
- **Discuss** your 'new or break-away traditions' early, to avoid disappointment and family pressure
- Set your **boundaries** upfront and early: such as saying no, negotiating plans and taking personal time
- **Recruit** the calmest, sanest person in your group to help you manage the people on the day
- Put a **smile** on your face as you greet people or walk through the door, as your initial reaction/response may set the tone for the day
- Plan a **group activity** to help occupy and focus the energy. Timetable events for fun and distracting the children (big and small)

- Anticipate potential family conflicts of opinion and encourage a calm, **listening** approach
- **Avoid known triggers.** For example, if politics or vaccinations are a touchy subjects in your network, don't talk about them. If someone brings up the topic, use distraction and/or quickly move on to something else to talk about.
- **Use "time-out"** for a break if you're feeling frustrated with family and likely to argue. If you need a break, take one...even if it is another 5-minute trip to the toilet!
- Have a **back-up plan or exit plan** if you're not feeling comfortable at an event and wish to leave

Tips for Wellbeing and Coping

- **Identify your best coping skills** for stressful situations (such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, exercise, [mindfulness and relaxation exercises](#), acceptance, helpful mindsets, recalling what you're grateful for, talking to a friend) and be prepared to use these if you need to
- **Try to be moderate** – it may be the season to be jolly, but too much food and alcohol is harmful. People under stress tend to 'self-medicate' with alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs. Try to remember that drugs can't solve problems or alleviate stress in the long term.
- Get enough **sleep** – plan for as many early nights as you can
- **Keep moving** – keeping up your regular exercise routine can give you the fitness and stamina to make it through the demands of the festive season
- If your planned coping skills are not working and you become overwhelmed, **reach out to talk** with your social networks and/or professional services (such as mental health professionals, doctors, counselling help lines and your workplace's Employee Assistance Program)
- As best you can, keep up your **healthy lifestyle routines** and things that bring you joy (time with people you like, resting, things that make you happy, hobbies, interests etc)

Bring out the best in yourself

- Focus on what really matters to you and try not to get bogged down in the little things
- Act according to your values (such as patience, respect, flexibility, determination, kindness...)
- Take time to consider what you are grateful for
- Let those close to you know what you appreciate about them

Taking care of money worries

Is the festive season a burden on your wallet? Here are some tips for managing your Christmas finances and reducing your [financial stress](#) during the silly season:

- **Identify what's causing you financial stress.** Buying gifts and attending social get togethers can be expensive. Plan ways to reduce spending. For example, you could suggest to your family and friends that you only buy gifts for the kids, or organise a 'Secret Santa' among the adults. Set a budget and stick to it.
- **Find low-cost ways to have fun.** Don't let money cut you off from your family and friends. If you can't afford expensive restaurant meals or cocktail catchups, organise a BBQ in the park or a party at home where everyone brings a plate of food.

Tips for FIFO and Remote Workers

- If you're on R&R, spare a kind thought for your workmates holding the fort :-)
- If you're working on site, think ahead to plan something fun for Christmas day
- Call your family and tell them what you appreciate about them
- Set realistic expectations with family, in advance, about your Christmas timetable and how long you can stay and how much you can squeeze in.

- Drive safe, arrange designated drivers where fatigue and alcohol are factors
- Keep your safety-mindset turned on, as 75% of injuries in Australia occur at home and play
- If you've made healthy life-style changes during the year - keep these up, in balance with permission to let yourself 'indulge' a bit over Christmas.
- Take a moment, or two, to appreciate what's good in your life, and that spirit of what Christmas time means to you.

Managing loneliness

There are ways to overcome loneliness if you find yourself isolated or grieving a loved one over the Christmas period.

- **Connect with friends and family.** Even if you're separated by distance, you can stay in touch with loved ones online or by phone.
- **Volunteer.** Why not lend a hand to a local charity over Christmas? There are lots of charities who need help. You'll connect with people and feel good about making a positive contribution.
- **Attend community events.** Find out what's on locally and get involved. Whether it's Christmas carols or local markets, getting out and about can help relieve loneliness.
- **Make plans for Christmas Day.** Develop a plan in advance to avoid feeling depressed or stressed on the day. Perhaps make yourself a special breakfast, buy yourself a gift in advance so that you can enjoy on the day, attend a local church service, or take a stroll through the local park to give yourself a treat.

How to help a lonely or bereaved loved one at Christmas

It's the most wonderful time of the year — for some of us. But if you're lonely, isolated or bereaved, the festive season can serve as a gloomy reminder of what's missing.

- Ask how they are, and listen supportively
- Invite them to something
- Encourage them to form a plan
- Make new traditions - like gatherings at different venues or new ways to celebrate
- Honour missing loved ones, by using their names and sharing stories about them
- [More detail](#) (APS Website)

Sources of Support

- Lifeline counselling (24/7): 13 11 14
- Beyondblue 24/7: 1300 22 4636 (www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Mensline: 1300 78 9978
- Parentline: 1300 30 1300
- Kids helpline: 1800 55 1800
- Private counsellors, psychologists, doctors
- Social support, friends, family, workmates, mentors, online forums you're part of
- [More Tips Sheets](#) for Managing Challenges, Change and Stress at YES Psychology's Website

Tips for managing grief during the holidays

It is important to remember that everyone experiences grief differently and that it's a normal, human reaction to the loss of a person. It is common and reasonable to experience anxiety, stress, sadness, regret, anger or isolation as part of the grieving process. This holiday season, take the time to acknowledge any grief in your life and use these tips to support yourself and loved ones:

- **Acknowledge:** Acknowledge that the holidays will be different and they may be emotionally difficult.
- **Remember:** Remember those you have lost. It is important to acknowledge that a friend or loved one is struggling. Encourage memories and value the explorations of friendship they bring. Perhaps, pull out old photo albums and spend some time in the holidays looking at photos.
- **Communicate:** Active listening from friends and family is an important step to helping someone coping with grief or overwhelming feelings of loss as well as taking advantage of fleeting time. Be honest. Tell people what you do want to do for the holidays and what you do not want to do. Listen to yourself, trust yourself, communicate with your family, and do what works for you.
- **Traditions:** Decide which traditions you want to keep. Decide which traditions you want to change. Maybe create a new tradition in memory of your loved one.
- **Make a List:** Check it twice. Grief makes it harder for us to concentrate and remember things. When you have a lot going on at the holidays, make a list even if you aren't usually a list-maker, and write things on the calendar to help keep you organised and less stressed.
- **Help:** It's okay to admit you are struggling with your grief. Most people find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss and do not need to seek professional help. However, if you are finding it difficult to manage on a day-to-day basis, it may be helpful to see a counsellor or other health professional. Say YES to people who want to help and may offer their support. Take them up on their offers.
- **Practice Self Care:** Make efforts towards mindfulness, healthy lifestyle and stress management – this is very personal and different for each person. For some it may be meditating for 15 minutes every morning or going for a brisk walk and for others getting a massage is helpful.
- **Be Flexible:** Be understanding and supportive if someone wants to do things differently this holiday season. Remember that not everyone will be grieving the same way you are grieving. Some people find strength in long established traditions while others may choose to avoid customs of the past and do something new. It's okay to do things differently.
- **Volunteer:** Doing something kind for someone else, such as helping at a charity, delivering presents to the disadvantaged, or working with children, may lift your spirits and help everyone feel better about the holidays.
- **Hustle and Bustle:** Don't feel guilty about skipping events if you are in holiday overload. If you need to take some time to yourself instead of attending events, make sure you let the organiser know that you're not feeling up to it and make an effort to see them when you're feeling better.
- **Get 20 minutes of sunlight and fresh air:** Stop and smell the roses. Some people find that the smell of flowers, pine trees or just fresh air can decrease stress and increase relaxation.
- **It's okay to be happy.** Finding happiness and enjoying the holidays does not diminish how much you love and miss the person who isn't there this holiday. Don't feel guilty for the joy you do find this holiday season.
- **Follow-up after the holidays to check in.** Given the activity of the season, some people may make it through the holidays without any issues but they might find the post-holiday period to be more difficult. So remember that these tips can be helpful year round.

Sources: YES Psychology & Consulting; Beyond Blue Community Forum Thread; Australian Psychological Society; HealthDirect Australian Government; Palliative Care Australia