

Coping with Christmas: a survival guide for when festivities are tough

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It's supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year. The cheerful TV ads encourage spending and the songs blaring out from speakers in every public space tell us stories of loving families and joyful times. But for a significant number of people, Christmas is an incredibly tough time of year.

A few years ago we published a post about the [difficulties of getting through festivities for many survivors of childhood sexual abuse](#). Amongst other things, the writer recommends doing Christmas on your own terms:

There is an awful lot of societal pressure to 'do' Christmas. Even now, after years of doing it my own way, I have learned that you can never tell people you are doing NOTHING on Christmas day. They look horrified! They invite you to their home, they suggest alternatives. They can't imagine that anyone would want to opt out of the celebrations altogether. Thankfully though, I do do something, but it is so much on my own terms, and so far removed from the traditional family day that I feel more in control, and more like I'm making it my own.

But it does not remove the memories.

It is a difficult step to take but one that can make a difference to how in control someone feels.

Of course, there are many reasons why people dread this time of year. I talked with some other collective members, and we thought about the following groups of people, although it is not an exhaustive list:

- LGBT people who aren't out, or who are and have difficulties with family and friends accepting them;
- people with a history of abuse, especially if it relates to family or the time of year;
- people who are isolated or lonely;
- people in fear or violent relationships;
- people far from home;
- people with mental health problems or who are disabled or housebound;
- people in poverty;
- people who have been abused within a religious or cult setting;
- people who have been bereaved, especially if the bereavement happened around this time of year;
- people who do not celebrate Christmas;
- people with eating disorders;
- people away from their families;
- people dealing with relationship breakdown;
- people with alcohol addictions.

Triggers are everywhere. It is impossible to hide from the visual, audio and even sensory reminders of how you are supposed to feel, what you are supposed to be doing and who you are supposed to be with, and it can become incredibly overwhelming.

So if you would love to be with your family on Christmas day but they don't want to see you since you came out to them, or if you want to see friends but struggle with the absence of public transport, if you would love to celebrate Christmas with your kids but simply can't afford a big feast, a twinkling tree and a pile of gifts, or if you have nobody around who you can safely spend time with, what do you do?

Reach out

One man, James Gray, [took out a newspaper advert](#) to request company in order to avoid spending his tenth Christmas alone. Many readers commented that if they lived nearer to him they'd invite him to celebrate with them, but in fact there are Mr Grays all over the country, he is not the only person who is lonely and wants to share the day with somebody. And while taking out an ad in a newspaper may not be to everybody's taste, if you have nobody to spend the day with and you would love company, ask those around you. It can be scary because you probably don't want anyone to feel obliged, but sometimes you will find that somebody else is in the same position as you are, also looking for a friendly face to be with on the 25th.

Do it your own way

Our guest blogger four years ago suggested,

You can also start to create your own rituals. If you want to celebrate Christmas, but not in a way that's inherently linked to a difficult childhood, then imagine what you would really like to do to celebrate, while trying to remove all society's pressures about the season from your mind. The day might start with an early morning stroll. You might write and illustrate a cartoon. You might clear out the clutter from the attic! You could also look at how other societies, cultures and religions celebrate special days, and get some alternative ideas.

Those also work if you opt out of Christmas altogether. Once you get used to people fretting about your lack of plans, then it's all yours.

You can get on with it as if it's no different from any other day, perhaps using some self-made rituals if you find yourself feeling left out of the loop.

Work

Other people enjoy working or volunteering on the day. zohra has found it uplifting to volunteer at a food bank or soup kitchen, and I have friends who do not want to 'do' Christmas so are happy to take the Christmas day shifts at their place of work, allowing colleagues to take the day off and taking the pressure off themselves because they have a 'legitimate' reason to not be at a tense family dinner or a triggering Christmas Mass.

Avoid self-destruction

If you're feeling rotten it might be tempting to drink a bottle of Baileys and eat nothing but crisps, but these things will not only not fix anything they could make you feel far worse.

Alcohol is a depressant and a lack of nutrients will make it harder to summon the energy to keep going, so limit the booze and try to get some vegetables into your system. Try to get the right amount of sleep, and if you are having urges to self-harm use your most effective coping strategies, reach out to somebody you trust or call a helpline to try to get through it safely.

Choose your priorities

Perhaps there are certain celebrations you would love to take part in, whilst dreading other events. The [DIY Couturier](#) recommends prioritising according to your desires, saying,

If you don't attend to the special seasonal thing that makes you happy, you're going to be absolutely miserable attending to the things that make others happy.

Damage limitation: social media

Helen tries to stay off social media. She says,

"I just end up watching half the planet's celebrations spread liberally across the day and that really doesn't help. The only slight light in the darkness last year was running a search for "Christmas is ruined" and watching the updates. If you ever wanted to learn what class privilege and the fetish of consumerism look like in a nutshell, that'd do it"

I watched a similar Twitter phenomenon last year, when somebody retweeted everything they could find that included terms such as "so unfair" and "I hate my parents". It really was enlightening, depressing and hilarious, all at once. If you are likely to be checking Twitter and Facebook on the day, look out for hashtags specifically for people who are alone or struggling.

Bop

Are you the kind of person who can change or enhance your mood with music? Maybe schedule an hour or so of sad songs to feel thoroughly miserable to, and then up the tempo or stick on a comedy video to lift your mood. For me, good music and good comedy can make a real difference to my state of mind but you may have a different trick that is more effective for you: a great book, dancing around the room or writing a poem. Whatever it is, if it works for you, do it.

Give yourself a break

I am constantly amazed by my mind's ability to make a bad situation worse. If I'm already feeling fragile it can create a barrage of self-defeating mantras and vicious insults. Try to get through Christmas without adding to your distress by bombarding yourself with criticism, too.

Have an escape plan

If you can't get out of an event that you don't want to go to, have a clear escape plan so that, when you've had enough, you can get away. Prepare excuses for leaving, and work out in advance how you'll get home.

Take pleasure where you can find it

In situations that are incredibly trying we need to grab hold of anything that might help. Whether that's watching a cheesy film, finishing off a box of chocolates, reading 1,800 pages of [Passive Aggressive Notes](#) or just having an afternoon nap, do what you need to do to keep your spirits up. "Thinking happy thoughts" is [not an unproblematic concept](#) but, if it works for you, do some positive affirmations or lists of things you're thankful for.

Finding positives in the small things and focusing on them can help, so when Helen informed me that, "Christmas Day is four days after Midwinter Solstice so there's about an extra minute of daylight...", it did genuinely make me smile. Find things like that.

This, too, shall pass

While this time of year is all-consuming and overwhelming, remind yourself that it will end. Whether that, for you, will be Boxing Day or at some point in January, the festivities **will** stop and the world will eventually get back to normal.

How to support friends who are struggling

It might be that you are thoroughly enjoying the festive season but you're aware that some people you care about are finding it tough. One of the most helpful things you can do is not make assumptions. Asking, "are you going home for Christmas?" presumes a welcoming and happy family life, as well as access to transport, and telling someone to "treat themselves to something nice" is an unrealistic and insensitive piece of advice for the [13 million people living in poverty](#) in the UK.

If someone has an eating disorder, let them choose how much, if any, of a Christmas dinner they eat, and if somebody is on their own then give them a call to see how they are and have a chat.

If you love the carols and tinsel, it can be difficult to understand why Christmas is so difficult for so many people, but follow your friends' lead and offer support sensitively.

Further reading

- [The Ghosts of Christmas Past](#)
- [Christmas Survival Tips For the Melancholic And The Infirm](#)
- [Eating disorders and Christmas time](#)
- [Dealing with domestic violence at Christmas \(for children\)](#)
- [Coping with family stress at Christmas \(for grandparents\)](#)
- [Coping with Christmas when you have cancer](#)
- [Christmas and autism spectrum disorders](#)
- [Coping at Christmas \(for bereaved people\)](#)
- [9 Ideas for Coping with the Holidays When You Have a Mental Illness](#)
- [8 Tips for LGBT People to Lower Holiday Stress](#)

https://www.thefword.org.uk/2013/12/coping_with_christmas/