How might Christmas affect my mental health?

Why Christmas is a hard time

Adverts show the 'perfect' family smiling and laughing. Shops are piled up with costly gifts. Items in magazines are described as 'must haves'. Friends and family may have more disposable income than you do. You may have lost a loved one since last Christmas. You may be worrying about illness – your own or that of loved ones'. You may be managing family with difficulties around eating. You may be estranged from your family. You, or a family member, may be an alcoholic. You may be struggling with anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts. You may suffer from fatigue.

Wowsers.

Happy Christmas?! It can be really tricky to take on board this expectation that everything will be great for 25th December! This information leaflet doesn't cover everything, but the helpline links at the end will be useful if the area you are struggling with is not covered in detail.

Money worries

When there is a cost of living crisis, things are hard enough. But when that happens at Christmas, this can be even more stressful. Being at home more means worries about needing to use heating for longer – energy costs are a significant portion of family costs for many. 20% of people name heating costs as a cause of conflict at home.

People can feel obliged to spend money they don't have on expensive gifts. Relate suggest that communicating with loved ones before Christmas is useful. Saying something like 'money is tight this year, but it's important to me that you feel loved. How about doing...?'. Most people find money hard to talk about – if this is you, make sure you state this.

Social events can cost a lot of money too. Suggest to friends or family that you do a 'bring a plate' party, rather than spending lots of money on a meal out. Other people will probably be relieved to have the chance to budget too!

Estrangement

Many people are estranged from loved ones for a whole host of reasons. Sometimes there are family arguments which leave people without the skills or inclination to reconnect. Adult children many reject their parents, or parents may reject their grown-up children. Rifts can appear when families have different view on religion, sexuality, gender issues, career paths, marriage, divorce or partner choices. As children become adults themselves, they do so with a range of principles and values which don't always match

those of their parents. This is really difficult all year round, but when people are presented with 'happy family' images at Christmas time, it can be particularly difficult to bear. Much of our identity is made up from our position in a family – parent, child, aunty, grandparent – without this identity we can feel at a loss, and forced to look inwards. This can be very uncomfortable, especially when we are used to being people pleasers and carers. Sitting with feelings of resentment, especially at Christmas, means the grief and loneliness is amplified.

If a family member chooses to pull away from family life, those left behind are hurt, helpless and out of control. www.standalone.org.uk is a useful charity which supplies support to parents whose children are estranged. It is important to realise also that others in the family may or may not be estranged too – grandparents may lose contact with grandchildren, aunties and uncles with nieces and nephews. Everyone feels that they 'shouldn't' be having negative emotions at Christmas - we are constantly told to experience joy and happiness at this time.

So - what to do? It is OK to be angry. In fact, this can allow for autonomy in estranged children, and growth or self-reflection in parents. With support, anger can transform a person and allow for self-discovery. A non-judgmental audience is important, and seeking counselling support is a really safe way to do this. With support, Christmas can be akin to an initiation into being 'you', rather than just an entity within a family.

The future can be daunting if we look at months or years stretching ahead, so thinking of today, now, this minute, can make the prospect a little easier to manage. Treat yourself kindly. Think of ways to show yourself love. You may decide not to take part in the festive period at all, and take yourself away somewhere. It may be that you choose to spend the day alone and allow yourself the sadness that comes with that. Remeber that you don't owe anyone an explanation - you can say that you find it difficult to talk about Christmas, and therefore you don't need to share your plans if you don't want to. You can also ask those around you for the support you need. Many of us find that really hard, but if you are really struggling, you need to believe that you are worthy of support and kindness from others.

Grief

Another very difficult situation which becomes more poignant at Christmas occurs when someone close dies. The grief process is already a really hard one, but memories of the lost relative/friend when everyone is celebrating Christmas can seem inappropriate at best. You may feel angry at those who are carrying on with their Christmas gatherings as usual.

Try to plan how you will celebrate Christmas (or not). It is important not to be pressured into doing anything you don't want to do. It is perfectly acceptable to say that you don't want to celebrate the day; alternatively, you may want to keep traditions going and honour the person who has died in some way. You may want to look through old photos of your loved one, or light a special candle. You could buy yourself a present that you know they would have liked to buy for you, or splash out on some special food that you used to enjoy together. Listening to their favourite Christmas song, or hanging up their favourite decoration may be a comforting thing to do. Don't be afraid to talk about the person who has died – your memories live on.

If you know someone who is grieving at Christmas, it can be difficult to know what to say, or what support to offer. The most important thing is to acknowledge the person who has died. Mention them by name, and say that Christmas will be difficult this year without them. Even if you don't normally send a card, make the effort to write a few lines to show that you are thinking of them. Let the person know that you are there for them, and suggest something you could do together. It may be just to get together a raise a toast to the person who has died, or to share in a meal that they would have liked. If the person grieving has young children, they may appreciate having you look after them for a few hours to give them some time alone with their grief.

Being alone at Christmas

For those who live on their own, Christmas can be a lonely time. Sometimes people may take pity on you and invite you to their house, but you may not feel comfortable with that. Don't be afraid to thank them for their kindness, and maybe ask if you could pop in later in the day for a glass of something instead. Have in mind what is right for you. If you would like company, there are often church groups or charity groups who offer a group Christmas dinner which you could attend. You are likely to meet other people in your situation who will understand your need for company at this time of year.

Coping with depression/suicidal thoughts/ anxiety at Christmas

Managing your mental health over the Christmas period can be tricky. Managing poor mental health in winter is already hard, and then along comes the festive period! Social gatherings are a sensory overload, as is shopping for gifts in busy streets. This can be the time when panic attacks surface, leading to loss of confidence and exhaustion too.

It is important to regulate the number of activities you say yes to. Everything you do will drain your physical and mental 'batteries', so be aware that you will need to sometimes leave an event early, and sometimes just say no to it

in the first place. Let people know that you would still like to catch up, maybe for a shorter time, or maybe after Christmas when things aren't quite so busy. Honesty around the things you are, or aren't able to cope with is important. It is no good setting yourself up for days of anxiety around attending an event when you knew from the start that you would find it hard!

For those struggling with anxiety, it is doubly important to give yourself time to regulate your nervous system when you can. It is easier and more effective to give yourself daily moments to meditate, listen to relaxing music, or do some breathing exercises, than it is to try to dampen down the cortisol levels after a full – on panic attack. Regular yoga or exercise sessions are great for reducing stress hormones, and increasing 'happy' hormones.

Christmas is especially busy. However, the most effective way to manage this is to operate on a calm, even keel. Consider giving yourself a pamper night – everyone's idea of pampering is different, but you could consider painting your nails, doing a puzzle, going for a walk, watching a film, soaking in a bubble bath, turning your phone off, or lighting a scented candle. Any time you can give to yourself is worthwhile.

Exaggerated portrayals of Christmas cheer are unhelpful to those with depression. It can make you feel increasingly isolated and blocked off from the world. It can be helpful to remember that you are far from alone. Up to 25% of people suffer from poor mental health. Use the helplines like Samaritans and Elefriends as support when you need it, and reach out to trusted family and friends. If you don't tell them how you feel, they might be unaware. Importantly, if you are feeling suicidal, you can call 999.

Helplines

Age UK (England)

0800 678 1602
ageuk.org.uk
Information and support for older people.

Age UK's English helpline is open 8am to 7pm, every day of the year.

Beat

0808 801 0677 (England)
0808 801 0433 (Wales)
beateatingdisorders.org.uk
Offers information and advice on eating disorders, and runs a supportive online community. Also provides a directory of support services at HelpFinder.

Beat's helplines are open Monday to Friday,3pm to 8pm.

- Beat's answers to five questions you may have about Christmas with an eating disorder

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

0800 58 58 58
thecalmzone.net
Provides a helpline, online and WhatsApp chat, as well as information and support, for anyone affected by suicide or suicidal thoughts.

CALM's helpline and webchat are open from 5pm to midnight, every day of the year.

- CALM's advice on coping with feeling anxious at Christmas

Combat Stress

0800 1381 619
combatstress.org.uk
Treatment and support for armed forces veterans who have mental health problems.

Combat Stress's helpline is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

- Combat Stress's tips on coping with Christmas

The Compassionate Friends

0345 123 2304
tcf.org.uk
Provides support to bereaved families after the death of a child.

The Compassionate Friends helpline is open from 10am to 4pm, and 7pm to 10pm, every day of the year.

- The Compassionate Friends' tips for coping with Christmas

Cruse Bereavement Support

0808 808 1677
cruse.org.uk
Information and support after a bereavement.

The Cruse helpline is open Monday to Friday, from 9:30am. The closing time varies per day, from 5pm to 8pm. You can check Cruse's helplines page for more information about their opening hours.

- Cruse's information on coping with grief at Christmas

LGBT Foundation

0345 3 30 30 30
lgbt.foundation
Advice, support and information for people identifying as LGBTQ+.

The LGBT Foundation helpline is open on weekdays 9am to 9pm and weekends 10am to 5:30pm.

Men's Advice Line

0808 801 0327
mensadviceline.org.uk
Confidential advice and support for men who have experienced domestic violence and abuse by a current or ex-partner or family member.

The Men's Advice Line is open Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm.

Mind

4 helplines provide a voice at the end of the phone when there's nowhere else to turn. Each line meets a different mental health or wellbeing need – from information and service finding to understanding mental health law.

Infoline: 0300 123 3393

We're open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except for bank holidays).

MoneyHelper

0800 138 7777 (English)
0800 138 0555 (Welsh)
18001 0800 915 4622 (text relay)
moneyhelper.org.uk
Provides free and impartial money advice.

The MoneyHelper helpline is open Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm. The helpline is closed on bank holidays.

- Money Helper's information on money, saving and Christmas

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

0808 801 0331
support@napac.org.uk
napac.org.uk
Supports adult survivors of any form of childhood abuse. Offers a helpline, email support and local services.

The NAPAC helpline is open 10am to 9pm, Monday to Thursday. And 10am to 6pm on Fridays.

- NAPAC's advice on surviving Christmas as a survivor

National Domestic Abuse Helpline

0808 2000 247
nationaldahelpline.org.uk
Free 24-hour helpline for women who have experienced domestic abuse and violence, with all female advisors. Also offers a live chat and can help to find refuge accommodation. Run by the domestic violence charity Refuge.

The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. They also have a BSL helpline available Monday to Friday, 10am to 6pm. And a live webchat open Monday to Friday, 3pm to 10pm.

NHS 111 (England)

111
18001 111 (text relay)
NHS 111 BSL service
111.nhs.uk
Non-emergency medical help and advice for people in England. If you call 111, select option 2 to access a 24/7 helpline offering urgent mental health support.

NHS 111 (Wales)

111
111.wales.nhs.uk
Non-emergency medical help and advice for people living in Wales. If you call 111, select option 2 to access a 24/7 helpline offering urgent mental health support.

NHS 111 is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

NHS UK

nhs.uk
Information about health problems and treatments, including details of local NHS services in England.

Relate

relate.org.uk
Provides help and support with relationships, including information and counselling.

- Relate's information on relationships and Christmas

Samaritans

116 123 (freephone)
jo@samaritans.org (email response may take several days)
Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS
samaritans.org

Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone who needs to talk. You can visit some Samaritans branches in person. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm–11pm every day).

Samaritans' helplines are open every day of the year.

- Samaritans' Christmas coping information

Shout

85258 (text SHOUT)
giveusashout.org

Confidential 24/7 text service offering support if you're in crisis and need immediate help.

Shout is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

- Shout's tips on feeling less alone over the festive season

The Silver Line

0800 4 70 80 90
thesilverline.org.uk
Provides support, information, friendship and advice for anyone aged over 55 who may feel lonely or isolated.

The Silver Line is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Stand Alone

standalone.org.uk
Charity supporting adults who are estranged (not in contact) from their family.

- Stand Alone's festive guide to the Christmas period

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

0300 111 5065
support@uksobs.org
uk-sobs.org.uk
Emotional and practical support and local groups for anyone bereaved or affected by suicide.

Switchboard

0800 0119 100
hello@switchboard.lgbt
switchboard.lgbt
Listening services, information and support for LGBTQIA+ people.

Switchboard's helpline is open 10am to 10pm, every day of the year.

Tommy's

tommys.org
Information and support for people affected by stillbirth, miscarriage and premature birth.

- Tommy's advice on coping with Christmas when you've suffered the loss of a baby

The Trussell Trust

0808 208 2138 (Help through Hardship helpline)
trusselltrust.org
Emergency food and support for people in need. Includes a searchable list of local foodbanks.

The Help through Hardship line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. The helpline is closed on public holidays.

Bibliography:

Mind Christmas and mental health

Cruse You searched for christmas - Cruse Bereavement Support

Standalone Family Estrangement: Advice and Information for Estranged Parents - Stand Alone

Relate Christmas Sanctuary | Relate

Trussel Ending hunger together | Trussell

Becca Bland Family Estrangement & The Holidays: A Guide To Navigating The Festive Period

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of advice from your GP.

Nikki Fouracre, Aug 2026